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OR,  
**THE GIRL SPORT'S  
DOUBLE GAME**

A Story of the Sierras and the  
Golden Gate City.

BY C. E. TRIPP.

CHAPTER I.

THE GAMBLER DETECTIVE.

It was a dramatic, though by no means uncommon scene in those days of the new Wild West.

A great Overland stage-coach, dragged by six

"HERE YOU GO, ACE HIGH!" AND THE FATAL CHAIR DROPPED FROM SIGHT



sleek, powerful mules, had been brought to a halt by a band of rough riders at a table-like spot, high up on the narrow trail that wound, like a dark ribbon, across the face of the rugged old mountain.

White, scared faces peered from the windows of the big coach; but old Chain-trace Tom, the driver, had "been there" before, and he leaned back in his seat indifferently as he greeted the leader of the road-agents with:

"How'r ye, lieutenant?"

"Guess ye got out ahead o' time, this load of Poles."

"Thar hain't a hunderd dollars in ther boxes, and they hain't much more'n thet 'mongst ther passagers."

"Feel sorry fer ye, lieutenant, but d'-noz-I kin help yer any?"

The leader, who was known as the 'Lieutenant,' smiled grimly as he returned:

"That's all right, Thomas, my boy; I know you are not very well 'heeled' this morning, but I will try to be satisfied with the *one particular nugget I am after!*"

"All right, lieutenant. What's ther fu'st thing on ther programme?"

"Please invite your passengers to alight."

"K'rect, lieutenant; but I've got a lady inside, so don't make any more row than ye kin help," and Chain-trace leaned down from his seat and called:

"Hillo thar, folkses! Pile out, please, while I give yer all a knock-down tew his royal jags, ther Hi-muck-a-muck of ther Overland, Lieutenant Redbird, R. A."

"Don't be afeered of ther lieutenant, folkses; he won't hurt yer, but he do love gold-dust eternally!"

The "folkses," consisting of three roughly appareled miners, two well-dressed, Eastern appearing gentlemen, evidently speculators, and a handsomely formed, dark-eyed girl, most likely a beauty, but her face was half concealed by a dark mantilla of lace, alighted.

"Gentlemen, throw your weapons back into the coach," ordered the lieutenant, and he was quickly obeyed.

"Now, Chain-trace," turning to the driver, who was covered by a rifle in the hands of an outlaw, "I don't want to harm you in any way, for you are a good man, and full of pluck, so I hope you will not interfere with me in carrying out the captain's orders."

"I don't know what his object is in the present instance, but he has ordered me to detain this young lady, so you must go on without her!"

Chain-trace straightened up instantly.

"Look here, lieutenant!" he cried harshly, "you've held me up nigh onto a dozen times, and I've never kicked but once; then I layed out four of yer men and got a bullet in ther shoulder ter pay fer it, an' now I'm tellin' yer straight: yer can't hev the lady while Chain-trace Tom kin pull a trigger, or draw a bead!"

"Don't be foolish, Tom; that lady has got to go with me if I have to plant every driver between here and 'Frisco. That's straight, too!"

"Then begin on Chain-trace Tom!" yelled the driver, as he snatched up a revolver and leaped to the ground.

But the old driver was a corpse almost before he touched the earth.

Crack! Crack! and Chain-trace Tom pitched forward with a rifle ball through his brain.

But, almost upon the instant he was avenged.

A second shot followed the first so quickly they sounded almost as one discharge, and the road-agent threw up his arms and fell across the body of his victim, the slain driver.

The lieutenant turned with a vengeful curse—to find himself covered by a brace of heavy revolvers in the hands of a horseman, who had come silently around a sharp curve in the trail just ahead.

The outlaw band had the horseman covered with their rifles upon the instant, and only waited a word from their chief to drop him from the saddle.

"Ah, lieutenant, we meet 'once more!" spoke the horseman, who was a handsome, dare-devil looking fellow, dressed in corduroys.

"Who, in the fiend's name are you?" gasped the lieutenant, who dared not give his followers the word to fire while those two motionless revolvers seemed to glower upon him like two eyes of a vengeful Fate.

"Hey? Can it be possible you have forgotten me, lieutenant, after the clever manne, in which you escaped from the little trap I set for you in Pilgrim's Camp, last month?"

"Curse you! I know you now!"

"You are 'Ace High,' the Gambler Detective!"

"At your service, lieutenant!"

"Well, you *are* a cool one! but of course you don't have any idea of escaping me, with my men covering you with rifles even if you *have* the drop on me."

"But, of course I do! and that young lady also, whom, I understand from the last words of the driver, which I chanced to overhear, you intend to abduct! You dare not order your men to fire, for you know I am a dead-shot with a revolver, and the first motion on their part to fire seals *your* doom!"

The lieutenant glanced from his men to the rigid form in the saddle, his brain busy with the problem in hand.

"Ace High," the Gambler Detective, had been tight after him for nearly three months, and he well knew his own doom was sealed if the mountain hound was not thrown off the trail at once and for all time.

Finally the road-agent seemed to arrive at a decision.

"I will tell you what I will do," he announced.

"Well, you said you would!"

"I believe you consider yourself 'well up' in cards."

"I understand several games pretty well."

"In fact, if it was not for your mania for gambling you would be the greatest detective in the West!"

The face of the rider flushed hotly, but he returned in a calm tone:

"That is my business, Lieutenant Redbird! You just attend to the proposition you were about to make!"

"Oh, no offense; I was merely going to propose that we decide who is to have the lady by a game of 'draw!'"

"Oh, that is too thin!" exclaimed the gambler, though his eyes gleamed eagerly at the mention of his favorite game.

"You know you are no match for me at draw-poker; but you think I will get so interested in the play that your men can easily capture, if not kill me outright—"

"I will attend to that part!"

As the young girl spoke she drew a brace of dainty revolvers from beneath her fur jacket, and coolly brought them to bear upon the lieutenant.

All stared in astonishment at this unexpected turn of affairs.

"Mr. Lieutenant," she went on, "you proposed this game, and now, if the gentleman yonder still thinks the stakes are worth the game, I will pledge my word that no interference is offered by outside parties. Do you accept the outlaw's challenge, Mr. Detective?"

Ace High put up his revolvers and dismounted.

"With pleasure, senorita," he answered, bowing low before the fair stranger. "I am only Ace High, the Gambler Detective, but my poor services are entirely at your disposal!"

"Thank you, sir," she answered, still keeping a close watch over her leveled pistols on the lieutenant and his men.

"Perhaps one of the passengers has a deck of cards they would lend you?"

A new pack of cards was produced, and the two men sat down to the strange game, though evidently much against the outlaw's inclination.

The first deal fell to the road-agent, who drew one card, and his example was followed by the detective.

"Two pairs—aces high," announced the latter.

"A house of sevens!" cried Lieutenant Redbird. He had "drawn a fill."

Again the cards were dealt and again each drew one.

"A club flush!"

"A spade flush!"

"King high!"

"Ace high!" and the detective had won number two.

And now Redbird resolved upon a desperate move. He "stood" the cards under the other's cut, and dealt himself the detective's spade flush.

Each held their own hands.

"A spade flush!" cried Redbird exultantly.

"Aces full!" and the Gambler Detective arose, the victor.

## CHAPTER II.

### THE BEAUTIFUL DEAD-SHOT.

"THAT was a very transparent trick, lieutenant."

"I noticed that you were very careful to keep that flush together, so I took the liberty to slip the four aces between!"

The lieutenant glared at him vengefully, but spoke not a word, so Ace High proceeded:

"And now, Sir Outlaw, we will leave you for the present. I know it is my natural duty to shoot you where you stand, but that is not the way I want to take you into Sacramento—you

are cut out to stretch hemp! All aboard, gentlemen!"

"Can you drive a three span team?" asked one of the passengers nervously.

"I can—or a ten span, for that matter!" answered the detective.

At that moment his attention was attracted by the young girl, who, as the road-agents fell back at a sign from their leader, swung herself with perfect ease to the driver's seat.

"I much prefer riding here," she said in answer to the detective's look of inquiry.

He bowed, then again turned to the lieutenant:

"We are going now, lieutenant; and I advise you not to interfere with our departure!"

So saying he secured a repeating musket from his own saddle-bow; then, commanding his well-trained horse to lead the way he mounted the coach, gathered up the reins and started the six-mule team down the trail at a swinging trot, while the fair passenger kept the lieutenant covered with two revolvers.

"Can you handle a rifle?" he asked of the veiled form at his side.

"Not so well as I can a revolver. Why?"

"As soon as we pass yonder curve in the trail, the road-agents will charge us!"

"Do you think so?"

"I will stake my horse on it!"

"Then let us warn the men inside the coach, and be prepared for them!"

"No, we must depend upon ourselves, for each one of those five men is a coward! Are you good with a revolver?"

"I have never been beaten!"

"Good! Just beyond this curve is a desperately steep, though perfectly straight grade. I will set the brake, secure the reins and trust to luck, that the mules keep the grade. While you blaze away with the four revolvers, I will work the rifle for all it is worth!"

"A good plan, but I have a safer one!"

"Hey?"

"Yes. When you shot the outlaw back there, the team were so frightened the road-agents at their head could barely restrain them."

"That so?"

"Left to themselves, the mules would undoubtedly become frightened and dash us to the bottom of yonder gulch, five-hundred feet below!"

"But what—?"

"I have driven worse teams than these. I will empty the revolvers—for I flatter myself I can use them as well as even Ace High himself; then I will take the reins while you attend to them with the repeater!"

The mountain detective could but agree to this arrangement, for, just at this moment the six excited mules swept around the curve, the great coach rocked wildly for a moment, then went spinning down the steep grade—while the shrieking and grinding of the tight-locked brake was almost drowned by a wild yell from the baffled outlaws.

It was well for the coach and all it contained that the muscles of the Gambler Detective were like cords of steel, for the yells of the horde behind seemed to fairly madden the already frantic teams.

But, although they went plunging down the trail at a dangerous pace, a master hand controlled them.

A minute later the gang came dashing around the curve in pursuit, at the same time discharging an ineffectual fusillade, which was answered by the daring unknown with her revolvers.

"Two!—three!—four!" cried the girl, and still her pistols rung out spitefully in answer to the wild fire of the pursuers.

Just once Ace High glanced back. The stage was bounding and rocking at a terrific rate, yet at that instant the girl's quick aim, that it seemed nothing could disconcert, sent a fifth man hurling from his saddle to the dark gulch far below.

But now the gang seemed to be taking more care in their aim, for several bullets whizzed past in uncomfortable proximity, and, a moment later, the unknown uttered a startled cry as one struck the delicate gold-pin that confined the impenetrable folds of the mantilla, letting it fall from about her head.

Ace High fairly gasped as his eyes rested upon that heretofore unseen countenance, for never had his wildest fancy pictured one so beautiful!

But, this was no time to become fascinated by a beautiful face. Only eight of the road-agents were left, but the revolvers were empty.

"Here, take the reins and do your best!"

As the Gambler Detective spoke he passed over the heavy reins and whirled about in his seat, rifle in hand.



Then—clickety-click, crack! clickety-click, crack! rung out the repeater, and a man fell at every discharge.

There were five cartridges in the weapon, but they were not needed.

Lieutenant Redbird knew the man he had to deal with too well to charge recklessly up against that deadly aim.

As quick as he could—which was not until three of his men had fallen, he drew up his flying steed, then turned tail and the fight and pursuit was over.

Ace High gazed with the most intense admiration upon his companion.

The small, gloved hands that curbed the struggling mules seemed formed of steel, and she handled the 'ribbons' like an old stager.

"In the name of all that is mysterious, who are you, senorita?" asked Ace High as he took the reins from her firm hands.

"Perhaps I will tell you later—but not now," she returned, again gathering the soft mantilla above her features.

"Then our acquaintance is to end at Pilgrim's Camp, the next station?" he cried with real disappointment in his tones.

"That is for you to say!"

"Then I say—No!"

"You may wish to retract those words. Only on condition that you accompany me to San Francisco will I reveal my name, identity, and business in this wild land!"

Ace High glanced at her sharply. His enemies were reckoned a legion. Might this not be a plot to entrap him?

That had been tried by beautiful women before; but, there was no designing light in those great dark eyes.

"Don't misunderstand me," she went on, "I seek your professional services only. I have powerful enemies to fight—even knife to knife—and you, the coolest, bravest man I ever saw I want to assist me. I will tell you my story at the next camp, and if you accept the case, you may name your own price at its successful close."

### CHAPTER III.

#### THE BONANZA WIDOW.

"FATHER, I must have a couple of thousands!" Banker Banderson wheeled his office chair with a jerk, and glared at his handsome, dissipated son angrily.

"Barry, this thing has got to stop right here! It has come to a pretty pass when a father is blackmailed by his own son.

"You assume to dictate to me what your allowance shall be, just because you discovered, by chance, that I was a confirmed gambler, instead of the pious church elder I appear to be to the world.

"But now it must stop!"

"I have had the devil's own run of luck lately, not only with the cards, but on change, and the race-track as well.

"In fact I am on my last legs!"

"If something don't turn up soon to place me in funds, Bonanza Bob Banderson will blossom out a bankrupt!"

"Is it so bad as that, father?"

"Bad! It is just as bad as it can be!"

"But can you not work up some scheme to place the required funds?"

"There is but one hope left!"

"And that?"

"You have heard of the Bonanza Widow as she is called—Madame Cardigan, who has lately settled in the city?"

"Yes; her wealth is said to be boundless."

"And that general idea is well founded. Well, she is now upon the point of placing cash and securities to the amount of seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars in the hands of Banderson & Co. for safe keeping; and if I can once get hold of that magnificent sum I am saved!"

"Jove! She must be made of money!"

"That is about the size of it."

"She has deposited all of twenty millions with different banks here in San Francisco, and there's no knowing how much she has placed with Eastern institutions."

"And you think she will patronize Banderson & Co.?"

"I can only hope so."

"But there is a rumor afloat in commercial circles, but how it originated I don't know, that our company is in deep water."

"But she is to call to-morrow, when I shall know for a certainty whether I am to sink or swim!"

"Well, if you are to have a personal interview with the rich widow I will place long odds that you get the securities, for it is a well known fact

that Bonanza Bob Banderson is irresistible with the fair sex."

"You are a great flatterer, Barry; but you come naturally by it."

"Of course I know what your object is, and as usual I 'cave.'"

"Here is the two thousand; but you had best go slow until we hear from the widow!"

The young "blood" stowed the roll of bills and gold away carefully, and was upon the point of leaving the office when a ring at the door was heard, and a moment later a gaudily liveried footman—a negro—entered.

"Mistah Banderson I believe?" he said, addressing the banker.

The latter bowed and motioned toward a seat.

But without accepting this mute invitation the footman drew a small, delicately scented note from his pocket and handed it to the surprised banker.

"No answer required, I believe, sah!" and the negro messenger bowed himself out.

Bonanza Bob's face was as pale as marble as he hastily broke the seal of the note.

"What makes you so nervous, father?"

"That servant wore the livery of the Bonanza Widow, and I fear our cake is all dough!"

In a moment he had perused the note.

"It is just as I thought. We are ruined!"

"Read that, Barry."

The son took the note and read as follows:

"MESSRS. BANDERSON & Co., BANKERS:—

"Late reports as to your financial strength determine me to cancel my business engagement with you to-morrow.

"Respectfully,

"ANITA CARDIGAN."

"Ruined! Ruined!" groaned Banderson, burying his face in his hands.

"What is the very smallest amount that will tide you over this difficulty?" asked the son.

"Nothing short of one hundred and fifty thousand dollars!"

Barry Banderson—blood, sport, gambler and general "man about town," thought deeply for some moments.

At last he arose and moved to the door.

"Well, never say die, governor! Study up the thing and hit on a drive—if you can, and I will do my best to raise the wind to-night!" and he left the building, mounted his horse that stood hitched near, and set off down the street at a sweeping canter.

The day was now drawing toward evening, and young Banderson headed his horse toward the suburbs for a swift gallop, to quiet his nerves, preparatory to a night of heavy play at one of Frisco's most palatial gambling hells.

He had resolved upon one last desperate stroke to retrieve his fallen fortunes.

His luck lately had been simply of the worst description; but it must turn some time, he reasoned, and why not to-night when he was so desperately in need of money?

At the end of an hour he had passed the limits of the city, and now he turned for a wild dash back into town.

Hardly had he gotten well under way when a shriek broke the evening stillness, and a large black horse, bearing a female figure, dashed from a walled lane some distance ahead and went tearing madly along the street, cityward.

One glance revealed to the young "blood" the identity of the fair equestrienne, as well as her great danger, and pressing spurs to his high-strung thoroughbred, he dashed like an arrow in pursuit of the runaway.

"It is Madame Cardigan!" he muttered as he flew along, "and if I can but rescue her the governor's fortune is made!"

Then in a steady, unexcited voice he called:

"Hold the brute steady, madame! I will save you, or break Brimstone's heart!"

The beautiful young widow—she could not have seen twenty-five summers—cast one quick glance backward, seemed to sum up the chances of a rescue with that glance, then settled back in her saddle with one long, steady pull on the bridle-rein that perceptibly curbed her iron-jawed steed.

"Get down to it, Brimstone!" cried the "blood," as he brought his tough riding cane across the horse's flank with a stinging crack.

The two steeds seemed to be about equal for speed, but the leading animal, almost crazed by fright, or with natural ugliness, lunged and "bucked" so, even while straining every nerve in the wild race, that Brimstone was lapping him rapidly.

Soon the two flyers were nose and crupper, then Brimstone's great nostrils crept along the other's flank—the saddle—nose and shoulder—neck and withers, then the "blood" bent low in his

saddle, gave his reeking steed a sharp command, and the two were running neck and neck.

The fair equestrienne was pale, though perfectly cool, as the "blood" commanded:

"Gather your habit close beneath you, madame, and be ready to leap!"

He dared not draw her from the saddle, for, to throw his horse off his gait while going at that terrific pace would mean death to both.

His only choice was to catch the lady when she leaped from the saddle and strive to keep his balance.

Now the word was given. The equestrienne disengaging her knee from the saddle-horn, deftly sprung toward him, and her horse, relieved of its light load, dashed on at a renewed pace.

That last leap was too much for the overstrained saddle-girths of her steed, and that article came bouncing to the ground as the animal flew on his way.

"I hope you will be none the worse for your little adventure, Madame Cardigan," murmured Barry as he helped the lady to the ground.

"Thanks to your daring, Mr. Banderson, I think a night's rest will completely restore me," and the beautiful girl-widow blushed at the young "blood's" ardent, admiring gaze.

A moment later the negro groom rode up with his mistress's saddle.

Barry removed his own saddle, placed that of the lady in its place, and lifted her into it in spite of her warm protestations; then declining the steed of the groom, bowed, and disappeared into a hostelry close at hand.

As Banderson passed from sight the lady said to her groom:

"Well, Mr. Hicton, what do you think of my scheme now? Could even you work it better?"

### CHAPTER IV.

#### A FORTUNE WON AND LOST.

THE "Golconda" was at this time, the leading gaming establishment of San Francisco.

Every appointment of the concern was on a scale of Oriental magnificence—glittering bar—resplendent dining-room, and luxurious gaming rooms, where every game of chance known to the sporting fraternity could be indulged in.

Hard-earned, as well as suddenly acquired fortunes had been lost over those richly carved tables, never to be reclaimed.

Heaps of yellow coins and rolls of bank-notes were seen here in seemingly reckless lavishness.

It was to the "Golconda" that Barry Banderson was driven some two hours after his adventure on the suburban road.

The rooms were fairly teeming with men of every stamp.

The knotty old miner, "out on a spree," jostled the well-kept but festive merchant or banker; the gay "blood" dropped his money carelessly over the little green tables, and the soft-hand gambler watched, hawk-like, for a victim to fleece.

Young Banderson made his way hurriedly to a long, gaudily furnished room on the second floor.

Indeed, this room seemed to hold a great attraction for the masses, as it had several nights in succession, and it was now crowded almost to overflowing.

Some two weeks before the adventure narrated in the last chapter, the *habitués* of the Golconda were considerably excited to see, pasted up in a conspicuous position, the following flaming poster:

"TO-NIGHT!

AT THE GOLCONDA!

The Greatest Attraction Yet!!

FLASH,

THE QUEEN OF FORTUNE!

The Girl Sport and Gambler!!

The Mascot of Monte Carlo!!!

COME! COME! COME!

And Try Your Luck at the Golconda!"

And come they did—everybody—anybody, who could rake up enough dust to pay the admission.

And they were satisfied!

At the further end of the large hall, a richly upholstered divan had been fashioned beneath a crimson pavilion, and here was seen the "Queen of Fortune" who was to play the house against all comers, with no limit to the game.

The Girl Sport looked to be not over twenty, with a superb form set off to the best advantage



by her half Spanish dress of scarlet and blue, an oval face lighted up by great flashing dark eyes, and a massy crown-of blue-black hair coiled high upon her proud head.

Her low-necked bodice, bare arms, throat, and hair were fairly aglitter with jewels of every description, and as the crowd surged into the hall that first night they unanimously voted her the most beautiful creature they had every seen.

Only two men, besides the dozen waiters who had gathered for the occasion, were present.

Ruby Rob, the proprietor of the Golconda, was lounging close by, watching a lively game between his girl champion and a tall, elegantly-attired, long-mustached and handsome man, who seemed to be coolly losing a small fortune, to judge by the pile of golden coin and nuggets the Girl Sport had already raked to her side of the table. More than one there easily recognized in the handsome gamester none other than Ace High, the Gambler Detective.

For an hour he held his position, and lost steadily; and indeed every night since, Ace High could be found at that table, now losing, now winning, until at last it seemed as though he had wearied Fate itself, for of late he had been winning large sums from the game presided over by Flash, the Girl Sport.

Some thought it was a sharp game to draw others on. If so it was successful.

The luck of the Gambler Detective encouraged the crowd, and at the time of young Banderson's visit on the night in question, all were eager to try their luck with the Queen of Fortune.

It was Flash who had "busted" the young "blood," and fifteen hundred of the two thousand before mentioned had gone to pay a "debt of honor."

As young Banderson advanced to her table, Flash smilingly addressed him:

"Ah, Mr. Banderson, good-evening. Then you are not discouraged with your losses last night?"

"Not at all, senorita; though you nearly played me to bed-rock!"

"But I am not very 'flush' to-night!"

"Oh, you were not discouraged, but you had rather play a tame game until you see which way your luck is going to run, eh?" and there was just the suspicion of a sneer in the silvery voice as she spoke.

Banderson's face flushed hotly, for, truth to tell, he had begun to flatter himself that he had made a decided impression upon the beautiful siren of the Golconda.

But he could hardly mistake that tone.

"I am no coward, Senorita Flash!" he cried, pulling a rouleau of gold from his pocket, and flinging the shining mass upon the table.

"There are five hundred on the king and seven spot, on which this gentleman has just lost two hundred."

"I am playing against the house!"

At an almost imperceptible gesture from her jeweled hand, Ace High and the gent who had lost the two hundred, stepped back.

"Please accept my thanks, Mr. Banderson. The bank is getting low, as the detective gentleman yonder has been a winner for twenty thousand, and your five hundred will come handy."

"If you get it!" growled the "blood."

"There is the 'rhino,' play!"

Round went the golden wheel, the cards were examined, and Banderson was the winner.

"Your luck has changed," smiled the siren.

"Never mind the luck; there is the thousand on the same cards—play!"

The cards clattered musically upon the table, and the "blood" again won.

"Two thousand on the king and seven!" cried the excited sport.

Again he won, and again he bet the lucky cards. For a full hour this was kept up—the king and seven winning evenly, and without a break, and Barry Banderson at last found himself fifty thousand dollars ahead.

"Once more, and the last call!" he cried as he pushed the mass of gold and notes upon the table.

"You will lose!" said Flash, her wonderful eyes just a little brighter, but otherwise calm.

"That is my affair," growled the "blood."

"You have bled me to the tune of a hundred thousand in the last fortnight, and now I will have it back!"

"Perhaps you think the game has not been conducted fairly!" and there was a dangerous flash in the great dark eyes.

"I do not say that."

"Very well. You will surely lose on this turn of the cards, but to satisfy you that all is straight I will let Mr. Ruby here deal!"

Ruby Rob glanced at her questioningly, but

she waved him forward with a commanding gesture. No objection was made to this, and Ruby Rob sent the cards fluttering to the table.

The crowd surged forward, with breathless eagerness to catch the result.

"You are a loser of fifty thousand, Banderson; the king and seven are not here!" announced Ruby Rob.

At that moment an evil-faced chap touched the trembling "blood" upon the arm and whispered to him a moment.

Banderson shot a malignant look at Ace High, then left the room.

## CHAPTER V.

### ACE HIGH IS TRAPPED.

"Now, Cotty! What did you see passing between Ace High and the Girl Sport?" asked Banderson of the tough, as soon as they reached the street.

"In good time, boss; but we hain't got no time now!"

"She ordered him to follow you!"

Banderson's face flushed angrily.

"Good, Cotty! It will be the last time he will follow a man!"

"I firmly believe he is in with the siren to clean me out. We will wait for him to get on our trail then lead him to the 'Crib'!"

"Then let's be moving, for that fellow with the full beard standing just inside the door is Ace High in disguise, or I am a snoozer!"

The "blood" looked in vain for some resemblance in the hairy, rough-looking miner in the doorway, to the dashing Gambler Detective; but Cotty, the "Hoodlum," never made a mistake, and he passed down the street with his tough companion as though all unconscious of his footsteps being closely dogged.

Nothing more was said until they reached the "Crib,"—a popular resort for the worst gang of thieves in the Golden State. Probably more murders and burglaries had been planned, and hatched inside the Crib, than in any spot of its size in California.

Only the worst characters in the city were supposed to enter its dark doors, but the elegant Barry Banderson walked in as though perfectly familiar with the place.

Cotty and the "blood" had hardly seated themselves in a curtained alcove, and their order for drinks filled, when the bearded miner entered and began the rounds of the card-tables.

"He'll keep, Cotty, till you've told your little story," muttered Banderson; "so tell me all you saw."

"Well, in the fu'st place, just arter Ruby Bob stepped up to the wheel, I saw the girl tell the bloodhound that she had fixed the cards so's ter bust you on that deal."

"Then she told him to follow you till you was safe home; but to look out for traps, fer he well knew you was snucks with all the wu'st characters in ther city!"

"The fiends she did!"

"Fact, boss. I take it the bloodhound hez b'en shadderin' of you fer some time."

"But for what purpose, Cotty?"

"Give it up, boss."

"But jest put a line under this: Thet ar gal ain't what she seems ter be; and she hev got a big scheme afoot."

"I hain't lived on my wits fer ten years fer nothin', boss, an' I says thet gal ar workin' a big deal fer somethin', tho' what it is I don't know."

"But how did you find out all this?"

"She could not have told him what you have repeated in so many words."

"By no means, boss."

"She had her hands in her lap, and pertended ter be pickin' at the fringe of her serape, but enstid, she war torkin' ter the bloodhound in 'deaf-an'-dumb,' which, as you know, I onderstan' havin' a brother that can't tork."

"I war watchin' of her all ther time, thinkin' likely she war up tew some trick ter beat you, so I seen her when she signaled ther 'detec.'"

"And you are sure this is all she told him?"

"Wal, she did ask, first, if he'd got a trailer on ther track of ther captain, but who ther 'captain' is I'd'no!"

"I can't imagine who it could be; but I don't think it concerns us any."

"Just my idee, boss. I didn't ketch his answer quick enough, but I think it was 'yes!'"

"Very likely; Ace High has never yet been known to make a mistake of that kind, curse him!"

"But now to trap the bloodhound!"

"Once he is out of the way, our coast is

clear. I have found how the Girl Sport leaves the Golconda, and to-night she will be in our power!"

"What? You don't mean to say you've arranged ter abduct the vixen to-night?"

"Yes, and it is lucky we caught on to the understanding between the two, for otherwise the 'detec' might have made us trouble."

"I'm yer oyster, boss; the next alcove on the right is the one with the poisoned bottle—"

"The poison won't do! Ace High is no kid, and we could never work the bottle act on him."

"Do you see where we are?"

Cotty glanced around.

"The 'spring-board' chair!" he whispered, pointing to a heavy piece of furniture to his left.

"That's the ticket, Cotty! Once get him into that chair, and down he goes to be dumped into the cellar full of water."

"The chair has never failed, nor told a secret, Cotty!"

"Right ye aire, boss; so here goes fer ther bloodhound!"

Cotty left the alcove, and passed over to where the disguised detective was drinking at the bar with one of the most notorious characters of the city.

Fate seemed to favor the Hoodlum, for the detective's companion was a friend of Cotty.

"Say, don't you two chaps want a little private game with me an' my pard?" asked Cotty, at the same time passing the other rough a quick signal.

"I'm willin' ef my friend, here, is," answered the disguised man-hunter, intimating his companion with a nod.

"I'm with yer," was the rejoinder, and the three returned to the alcove.

"I b'lieve you an' I can beat 'em, can't we?" asked Cotty, of the detective, at the same time seating himself in the chair opposite the one that was arranged to hurl the Gambler Detective to his doom beneath the "Crib."

It was a neat little trick, on the part of the Hoodlum; but he did not notice those gleaming eyes take in every detail of the fatal piece of furniture, nor the quick contraction of the bearded lips, as those same eyes rested for just one instant upon the almost indistinct crack running clean around the chair, in the outlines of a trap-door.

Oh, no; Cotty, the Hoodlum, was perfectly satisfied, for the seemingly doomed man-hunter took his seat without hesitation, and without even attempting to move his chair forward. Cotty slipped his hand beneath the little table; a sharp click followed, and two steel arms shot from the back of the chair, around the form of the doomed man, pinioning his arms tightly, before he could even stir a finger.

If the plotters expected a struggle, or outcry, they were much disappointed; instead, the captive grinned, as he coolly said:

"Why, you needn't have been to all this trouble on my account, boys; I wasn't so full of 'nose-paint' but what I could have set up alone!"

"That's all right, Asa, my lad!" returned the Hoodlum.

"We just wanted to ask you a few questions, and for fear you would think we was too inquisitive and leave, we thought we would fester ye down!"

"Very thoughtful of you Cotty, my son; but, fire away with your questions!"

"Wal, in the fu'st place: what did you foller me an' this gent inter this Crib fer?"

"To see what you wanted in here!"

"Well, you've found out, hain't yer?"

"Somewhat, only."

"And what did Flash want [you to foller us for?"

"To see where you went."

"Oh! And what did she want to know that for?"

"Out of a woman's curiosity, I suppose."

"What relation be you to the Girl Sport?"

"I am her great-grandmother!"

Cotty glared savagely at his prisoner. It suddenly occurred to him that the captured detective, was making sport of him.

"Curse you!" he hissed, again reaching under the table. "You've got too much lip. Do you know what I'm goin' ter do?"

"Bust, I guess, by your looks!"

"I'm goin' ter push on a knob under this table, an' you'll disappear through the floor!"

"Sort of a sleight-of-hand trick, eh?"

"That's right Asa! Go to your death with flying colors!"

"The chair will go down ten feet, then tip bottom up'rds, and spill you into a cement cellar full of water. If it don't dash yer brains



out on the bottom you'll drown like a rat in a tub!

"Here you go, Ace High!" and the fatal chair dropped from sight.

"At last the cursed bloodhound is trapped!" cried Cotty, as he led the way out of the Crib.

Without a second thought of the trapped detective they hurried in the direction of the back entrance of the Golconda.

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE MESSENGER ARRIVES.

IN the mean time "Bonanza" Bob Banderson, so called from the fact of his sudden, not to say mysterious acquisitions of untold wealth some ten years before our present introduction to the banker, was not idle.

Hardly had his spendthrift son reached the street than Banker Banderson arose from his seat, approached a small safe let into the wall of his office, and opening it, drew forth several wigs, false beards and mustaches.

Selecting one of each, he adjusted them to his head and face; then exchanging his coat for one of loud plaid that he brought from an adjoining closet, he left the office by a rear exit.

"Tell you what, old boy, you are losing your grip mighty fast!" he muttered thoughtfully, as he bent his steps in the direction of Market street.

"In the first place the Goddess Chance has ceased to smile upon you at plunging; or even light betting; consequently you have lost a cool half-million, in the last two years!

"Then there is the lieutenant: can it be that he has played me false—been bought off? or, more likely, become enamored of his beautiful captive, and 'skipped the gutter'?"

"Neither, hardly! He knows the power I possess as chief of the Hounds, too well to be false!

"The Hounds! Ha! Ha! Ha!

"Little the good people of 'Frisco know that that terrible order is yet in existence!

"They congratulate themselves that their much bragged of 'Vigilance' wiped out the Hounds long ago, but they never connected Bonanza Bob Banderson with the yellow-bearded Captain Nugget, so—well, they will hear the Hounds 'bay' shortly!

"But something must be done—and that at once, to bridge this financial gulf before me!

"The forlorn hope of fingering this Bonanza Widow's ducats has fallen through—smashed—fizzled! And even if Barry succeeds in winning the heiress, Miss Tilloson, as he seems to be in a fair way of doing, it will be too late to avert the crash!

"Why can't I think of some scheme, even if I had to set the Hounds to work—

"By the beard of the Prophet! I have it!

"I can yet handle the widow's half-million—"

By this time the yellow-bearded captain had reached Market street, and was just turning toward California thoroughfare when a hand fell heavily upon his shoulder, and he turned sharply to find himself face to face with as villainous a specimen of the San Francisco "hoodlum" as could be found in the city.

He was a man of past forty, ragged, dirty and uncombed, but his bloated, flabby face was as neatly and carefully shaven as the most stylish "blood" in the city.

He was well known to the authorities as a desperate character—an escaped convict from the penal colonies of Australia, but never since his arrival in the Golden State had sufficient information been lodged against him to place him behind prison bars.

"Well, Melbourne, what will you have?" demanded the disguised banker, as he wheeled upon the squat formed ex-convict.

"'Alf an' 'alf, may hit please yer 'ighness!" was the prompt reply, accompanied by an evil smile.

"Shut up, Melbourne! I am in no mood for joking.

"Tell me your business at once!"

"Well, professionally Hi ham a hex-burglar, but circumstances 'ave reduced me to the life hof a 'Ound, sir!"

"If you have any business with me, you smooth-faced villain, state it at once! If not, then I shall give you the worst mauling you ever had!" and the captain laid his powerful grasp upon the ragged shoulder of the ex-convict.

"Hall right, sir! Hall right! Hi meant no hofense sir!

"But the fact is, ther's ha messenger from the mountains waitin' to see you hat the 'Kennel, yer 'ighness!"

"Curse you for a fool! why didn't you say so at once?

"But come along with me—I may need you before morning!" and the tall captain turned, and hurried in the direction of the Chinese quarter, followed with some difficulty on account of his short legs, by the ex-convict.

When master and man—for such they evidently were—reached the center of that colony of vice, crime and mystery called Chinatown, the sun had sunk from view behind the Golden Gate.

But night is Chinatown's "busiest part of the day," and now all was life and gayety.

Barely nodding to the dozens of "pigtails" and hoodlums who addressed him, the captain passed hurriedly along the narrow street until he arrived opposite a huge frame building with many entrances leading from the dirty street, protected by gayly printed awnings.

Passing within one of these entrances, the two mounted a narrow stairway to a hallway upon the second floor, where they were brought to a halt by a yellow-skinned Major Domo, dressed in flowing robes, and armed with a short staff.

As he approached the guard, the captain drew from his bosom a slender gold chain, with a charm composed of a hound, cut from a blood-red stone.

"You are to meet here a messenger?" asked the Celestial in good English, as he bowed low at sight of the red charm.

"Yes, Hon-le, and be quick about it!" impatiently returned the captain.

"You will find him in the dragon room," and Hon-le handed the visitor a curiously formed key.

The two then passed on, past many doors bearing upon their panels strange devices representing fish, birds, and beasts.

Almost the last door upon the left of the hall was the one upon which was painted a yellow dragon.

Fitting the key to the lock, the captain and Melbourne entered the small room beyond.

The room was rudely furnished with three chairs, a table, and a rough bunk bed.

Upon this last reclined a man—pale, haggard and groaning as if in great pain.

Approaching, the captain shook him roughly, as he cried:

"What is the matter with you, Heinrich? What has happened?"

"Ach! cabdins, you vill gill me mit dot shagin, and here I vos deadt already!"

"Come now, no more of that!

"You baint half dead yet, but I'll finish you mighty quick if you don't stop that blubbering and tell me who sent you here!"

"Yaw, I vill tell dot putty kvick now right off already.

"I vas been a brisoner, und loaded mit shains, und handcuffs for more as two weeks.

"What are you giving us, Heinrich? Who made you a prisoner?"

"I vos nod oggskinted mit dot fellers; but he schust slumped oudt from behindt a beeg rock, und pointed a bistol straight at me, und he said 'youst you gid down from dot boss, Deitcher, or I vill plug you mit a hole through!' and ven I gid downdt dot fellers schust tied me up und gagged me so tight as nefer vos!"

"Where did this happen?"

"Aboutt dwelf mile dis side ouf Bilgrim Gamp."

"And why were you there?"

"Der lieutenant sent me."

"What did he send you for?"

"He vos dole me to dell you dot der fraulein vas get away from us."

"Then you captured her?"

"Yaw, und she cabdured us!"

"Well, go on, fool, and give me the particulars!"

"Yaw, I vos gomin' do dot right away kvick!

"Ven dot stage coom along ve sdoped him putty kvick. Den dose bassingers git oudt, und dere vos dot gal mit a fail on, already.

"Den der lieutenant says 'Dot gal vas god to coom along mit me!'

"Budt dot sdage-drivers he says, 'Nix coom arouse! Dot gal vas coom mit me, or you vas valk me mit my deadt body over!'

"Budt von ouf der poys shoot heem schust so kvick lige nothings, und bodth ouf dem falls schust so deadt lige a gorpse!"

"What, both? But who fired the second shot? Not the driver?"

"N x, it vos a fellow dot vos hossback, und he saidt dot gal vos go mit him!"

"And then?"

"They vos blay some boker do see vich vould haf dot gal, und dot hossback he beadt der lieutenant, und he droaf off mit dot gal und der sdage, und she vos gofered der lieutenant all der dimes mit do bistols.

"Und ven ve took affder dem, dot gal schust shot down nine ouf der poys schust so sligk like eferydings!"

"But who was the chap that rescued her?"

"Id vos Ace High, der Cambler Detecdives!"

"Fiends of Hades! That man!

"And you let him escape?"

"Yaw, he vos gid away!"

"And it was undoubtedly Ace High in disguise that made you a prisoner."

"Yaw, I dinks me so."

"But how did you make your escape?"

"I vos gept in a cellar by a hunter in Cold Ganyon, und I dug oudt in der night!"

The captain began pacing the narrow room, evidently in an excited state of mind.

## CHAPTER VII.

### SUSPICIOUS INCIDENTS—AND A LETTER.

MELBOURNE and Heinrich gazed a little apprehensively at the captain's moody face.

Indeed, the Dutchman even forgot to groan, in his fear that Nugget was but thinking up some punishment equivalent to his crime of allowing himself to be captured in the manner stated.

But Captain Nugget's brain was filled by far different thoughts.

"Who is this hunter who kept you prisoner in Gold Canyon?" he suddenly asked.

"Dot hunter vos a sdranger to me."

"Did he question you closely?"

"Yaw; he vos ask me so many questions, dot I dells him to go mit dunder und blitzen to!"

"Then he didn't learn your name or business?"

"Nix; he vos nodt pump Heinrich Frekelheim."

A satisfied expression overspread Nugget's countenance, that gave place to one of anxiety at the answer he received to his next question.

"What did you use to dig out of the cellar?"

"I vos use a sphade."

"A sphade?"

"Yaw; I vos find von bran' new sphade in dot cellars, und I vos dug me mineselluf mit id out!"

Nugget grew pale, as a terrible suspicion entered his mind.

"Could the hunter have seen the spade when he placed you in the cellar?"

"Yaw; dot vos von goot drick on dot hunters!

"Dot sphade vos righd in blain sight!"

"And how did you leave the vicinity of the cabin?"

"Yaw; dot vos some bettar sdill, already!

"I vos find von boss hitched schust outside der voods in, und I schust rode right away kvick, und coom here!"

"Curse you for a stupid fool, Heinrich! It was all a trick, and you took the bait like the dunderhead you are!"

"V'ot vos dot? V'ot drick?"

"Why, the spade being left in the cellar for you to dig out with, and the horse outside for you to ride away on!

"I'll bet a thousand ounces that you were shadowed to this very building!"

"Nein! You vos wrong, cabdins. I vos change mine disguises more as twenty dimes between dot ganyon und 'Frisco! und I vos not sbreak to von man!"

"But, fool, they would know the horse!"

"Gott im Himmel! I vos nodt dinks me ouf dot drick!

"I vill go right oudt und lead dem righd away—"

"You stay where you are!

"I want you for other business.

"Melbourne," turning to that wondering individual, "do you know where the rich widow Cardigan lives?"

"Hi do, yer 'ighness. Hi reckoned maybe we could raise ha breeze there some fine night, so spotted ther 'ouse!"

"You did well, Melbourne!

"That crib must be cracked to-night!"

"Hall right, yer 'ighness; Hi'm yer hoyster!"

"Every thing is prepared, and you will take Heinrich here, and one other, and make a clean sweep of it!

"Here is a plan of the house that I got only yesterday," spreading a sheet of paper before the ex-convict.

"Here, you see, is the lady's boudoir; and this cross represents a solid mahogany escritoire built into the wall of the room, and I am well satisfied it contains rhino to the amount of many thousands of dollars!

"It is a ticklish job, and the utmost caution must be used.

"But I know you will work the racket if any one can,



"Although Heinrich has made a terrible blunder, I can hardly blame him for it; and you will place the utmost trust in him when I tell you that he is the only one in my mountain band, besides the lieutenant, who knows how to find me, and he can be relied upon in any ordinary emergency.

"You will aim to reach the house by two o'clock, and it is now past eleven, so you had best start about preparing for the trip.

"Do you fully understand the plan of the house?"

"Hi do, yer 'ighness, hand will lug ther loot before three o'clock!

"Shall we bring the swag 'ere?"

"Yes, to this room. And mind there must be no failure!"

With this, the yellow-bearded captain left the building, while Melbourne and Heinrich set about preparing for a burglarious visit upon the Bonanza Widow.

"It is a bold stroke, even for me," muttered Captain Nugget, as he set out up-town once more.

"But the money must be forthcoming—if not by fair means, then by foul.

"I am well satisfied she keeps a tremendous sum in that desk, for only the other day when I was there in answer to her note relative to making the deposit, she payed her agent hundreds in gold from a drawer that I know contained as many thousands more; and besides, the gleam of the heap of jewels I caught fairly took away my breath.

"Very likely she has a guard stationed over the treasure, but I'll warrant Melbourne to bring away the 'loot,' if any there is in the house!"

Thus communing with himself, the banker-outlaw kept on until he reached the vicinity of his own office, where, moved by a strange impulse, he quickly removed his disguise and entered his private den. He had left the lamps unlighted, but now, they were burning, though turned low down, proving conclusively that his private-secretary had been here during his absence.

In looking about for some cause for his subordinate's intrusion, his eyes fell upon a sealed letter lying upon his desk.

Quickly opening it, he read these lines, while lost in a maze of wonderment:

"BANDERSON & Co.:—

"GENTLEMEN:—For reasons which I will give you later, I wish to recall my engagement with you for to-morrow, and will be pleased to intrust a million of gold and securities with your firm.

"Respectfully, ANITA CARDIGAN."

For a full minute Banderson glared at the note with open-mouthed amazement.

"What in the name of Satan can it mean?" he at last gasped, for it will be remembered he, as yet, knew nothing of his son's adventure out on the suburban road.

"A million! Great Scott! It is too late to recall Melbourne. But as it makes no difference whether he is successful or not, I will 'buck the tiger' till morning just to celebrate my big luck!"

But he little thought what Melbourne's failure might mean to him.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### IN A DEMON'S TOILS.

THE Golconda had closed early.

Taking their cue from the desperate luck of Barry Banderson, the crowd gathered in little knots all over the hall to talk the matter over.

The gang were staggered by what they had witnessed, nor was there a gamester present who would try their luck against the "Queen of Fortune."

She had been so positive that the "blood" would lose on that deal, that the crowd began to assume the idea that they were all along being systematically stripped of all their superfluous cash through the witchery of the beautiful siren.

"But the bank HAD been 'busted,'" some urged, and then they discovered a fact that had been hitherto overlooked, namely: Ace High, the Gambler Detective, was the only man that had, as yet, succeeded in accomplishing that undertaking.

Could it be, they asked themselves, that Ace High was in league with the Girl Sport, and was acting the part of "capper" for their games?

No! Ace High, though a confirmed gambler, was known from Frisco to the Rio Grande as a gentleman and a man of honor, and he would never stoop to play the role of common "capper."

It was simply a wonderful run of luck, backed by a heavy money-belt!

This was the conclusion the *habitués* of the Golconda at last arrived at; but their ardor for the "blind goddess" was cooled by the desperate play of young Banderson, and one by one they dropped out of the gilded saloon, until the great hall was nearly deserted.

Thus it came to pass that the doors of the Golconda were closed long before their usual time; and, while Ruby Rob caressingly stacked away his night's winnings, Flash, the Girl Sport, muffled her luscious form in the disguising folds of a huge waterproof, and left the gaming hall by a narrow rear exit, whose existence was not even suspected by the renowned "four hundred."

Passing through a long, dim hallway that led to an inclosed area in the rear of the Golconda, Flash entered a richly furnished private residence beyond.

But she did not stay here.

The house was untenanted at present, and letting herself out of the front entrance with a latch-key, she approached a carriage that had just drawn up at the curb.

She pulled the carriage door open—hesitated, then stepped back, and glanced up sharply at the driver, whose face was shadowed by a wide-rimmed hat.

"Is that you, O'Toul?" she asked.

"Faix! It's nobuddy else, me leddy!" answered the driver in a brogue that sounded significantly thick.

"Then what is the matter with you?" sternly.

"Oh, be ther light av yez two purty eyes, me leddy, Oy'm as chipper as a robin in June, so Oy am!"

"But you speak in a suspiciously thick voice, it seems to me—"

"Oh, now, me leddy, yez wouldn't deny a poor b'ye jest a drop ov ther ould crathur!"

The siren glanced sharply around, thrust her small gloved hand inside her cloak, then stepped into the close carriage, commanding:

"Drive on O'Toul, and never let this happen again!"

Then, as the carriage rolled on briskly she drew a slender blade from beneath her cloak and whispered, a little anxiously:

"What can it mean? This is not my carriage, though it bears a close resemblance to it!

"And that man on the driver's seat cannot be O'Toul, for he would as soon think of swallowing Prussic acid as liquor while on duty.

"It is some desperate plot to entrap me.

"Oh, if Ace High were only at hand; but I sent him away just when his strong arm would be most needed.

"I knew my enemies would try to get me into their power sooner or later, but I did not expect them to act even before I had struck my first blow at them.

"Can it be that that terrible gang have 'spotted' me thus early in the game?"

"I cannot think it an impossibility after that affair on the stage-trail.

"But they will find me prepared—"

"Ha! That is their game, eh?"

The carriage had been whirling along the deserted street at a rattling pace while the girl was thus communing with herself; but as she made that last exclamation it abruptly moderated its speed, while at the same moment the siren became aware that a fragrant, subtle odor was beginning to rapidly pervade the close carriage.

One long breath the girl took, and her senses all but left her in a delightful, dreamy languor, and she knew she was being drugged by the powerful odor.

"I recognize the perfume," she gasped.

"It is that of a Chinese drug—great Heaven! Can it be that they are carrying me to that sink of iniquity—Chinatown?"

"Well, let them! I will block the first of their little games, at least!"

The girl had previously discovered that the carriage door was fast locked, probably by some spring arrangement.

But nothing daunted by this, she sunk to the bottom of the carriage, and, with a half-dozen firm thrusts with the keen blade she held, succeeded in making an aperture in the thin floor boards.

Then pressing her face close to the opening thus made, the entrapped girl drew in great draughts of the life-giving oxygen until she felt herself once more in complete possession of her senses.

Hardly had she recovered from the effects of the small portion of the drug she had inhaled, than the carriage stopped, a small window near

the driver was drawn open, and Flash knew, though she could not see him, that the fraudulent O'Toul was gazing in upon her.

"All right, boss," she heard him address some person upon the curb. "Ther vixen air limp ez a rag, an' layin' in the bottom of ther keelage!"

This was replied to by a voice that caused the Girl Sport to almost betray herself by a cry.

It was the voice of young Barry Banderson!

"Good enough, Cotty! Let Shiny, here, take the team back.

"Open the door and I'll carry her in!"

The siren was dumfounded!

She had supposed she was a prisoner in the hands of the yellow demons of Chinatown, and it had been her intention to make a desperate fight for freedom, with both knife and revolver, as soon as the door was opened.

But this was different. She believed she saw through the scheme of the young "blood," and at once resolved to assist him all she could to a certain extent.

So, when the door was opened, the Siren of the Golconda appeared to be wrapped in the most helpless insensibility upon the bottom of the carriage.

"Hokey! But she air a daisy!" quoth Cotty, as Banderson lifted the limp but beautiful form, and bore it into the building.

"Why, I'd run ten times the risk yew hev for jest one smack from them air red lips of hern—"

"That will do, Cotty!" commanded the "blood."

"I want you to understand that you must show exactly the same respect to this lady that you would if she were my wife—which she may be yet, if I find she has the ducats I think she has!"

"Won't I astonish the nunny!" thought Flash, and she could hardly resist an audible chuckle.

Young Banderson deposited his fair burden upon a pile of soft cushions that graced the luxuriously furnished apartment into which he had borne her, then said:

"You may go now, Cotty. I will get Hop Sing to give her an antidote for his infernal drug—stay; you may post yourself in the second anteroom—I may need you!" and the two abductors left the apartment.

"Ah, yes! Hop Sing, you are needed badly!" laughed Flash, rising from the cushions when the two had passed from hearing.

"But while you are preparing your antidote, I think I will take a look at my surroundings.

"Ah! Here is an unlocked door—I will investigate," and she passed from the room.

When Banderson returned, accompanied by a fat and hideous-visaged old Chinaman—the proprietor of the "dive," he found his cage empty.

"Heavens! She has escaped by that door—it must have been unlocked!" he cried.

The Chinaman turned deathly pale.

"Die vixen!" he hissed, his words jumbled terribly by excitement. "Shlee will ruin Hop Sing. I must find her—stay here—don't dare follow me!" and he dashed from the room with wonderful speed, considering his corpulency.

In the mean time Flash had made a discovery. Tracing her way along a narrow hall, at the further end of which appeared a huge black curtain, she was surprised to hear the low hum of many voices ahead.

Approaching the curtain softly, she drew it slightly and peered through.

What she saw was a dozen masked men, seated around a long table, and by the fragments of conversation she caught, she knew the band before her were the remnant of the once powerful society called "The Hounds of Frisco!"

She drew back hurriedly, for she knew it meant death to be found there, only to find herself confronted by the demon-visaged Hop Sing!

"Ah, vixen! I'll dim those prying eyes of yours before morning!" he hissed, as he caught her up in his powerful arms.

## CHAPTER IX.

### TWO NARROW ESCAPES.

ACE HIGH, the Gambler Detective, had taken his life in his hands many times, but never, perhaps, in the whole course of his wild and desperate career among the law-breakers of the wild West, had he been forced to weigh every atom of chance with such nicety as when he seated himself in the fatal drop-chair of the Crib.

He well knew, when summoned to the alcove by Cotty, that a trap had been laid for him, and when he discovered the outlines of the drop-door beneath the chair, he knew what was to be the instrument of his destruction.

He realized he was in a desperate situation.



If he refused to occupy the fatal chair, one word of the plotters would bring to their aid a hundred of the most desperate characters in 'Frisco.

He resolved to take his chances with the chair.

As he seated himself, he grasped the arms of the seat firmly, for he imagined that to part with that article of furniture would mean death in some manner, and waited for the fatal drop.

It soon came, as we have seen, and he shot downward into the dark abyss beneath the crib.

Happily, Cotty had thoughtlessly prepared the man-hunter for what was next to happen; so, as the chair turned bottom upward, as the steel arms relaxed their grip upon him, the Gambler Detective brought forth every effort of his steel-like muscles to prevent himself from falling.

It was a terrible strain.

His arms seemed to be nearly torn from their sockets, but those white, shapely, but powerful hands never relaxed their grip.

He had rightly calculated that the delicate mechanism of the infernal drop would cause the chair to again rise to the alcove after accomplishing the fell designs of its manipulators, but his iron heart grew faint within him as the chair began to slowly ascend without regaining its former upright position.

"Great God!" he groaned, in an agony of pain caused by his awfully distended muscles. "I can keep my grip but a moment longer; and in passing through the trap I shall be torn bodily from my hold!"

"Why won't the cursed thing turn over?"

"It must! or Ace High has cashed in his last chip!"

In his desperation the entrapped man made a terrific effort to regain an upright position—and succeeded!

The chair flew back with a suddenness that almost tore his hands from their grasp upon the arms. His last desperate struggle had off-set the overbalance caused by his weight, and had set the machinery in motion that had saved his life.

When the chair regained the position in which we first discovered it, Ace High tottered from the death-trap, and leaned heavily upon the table to regain his all but shattered nerve.

In a few moments the Gambler Detective was his old cool, invincible self; and, picking up his hat, which had been brushed aside in his first sudden flight downward, he placed it upon his head, exchanged his bushy, tangled false beard for a long blonde mustache and goatee, turned his coat inside out—appearing then in a rather flash one of plaid—and thus metamorphosed from the "tough" miner of the lowest type who had entered the alcove twenty minutes before, to a "blood" of the first water, he sauntered nonchalantly out through the motley crowd of the crib, and soon reached the street.

"Jove! But that was a tight nip, Asa, my boy!" he muttered, as he straightened his athletic form and set off up the street at a rapid walk.

"We seem to jump nearer the brink every time we have a scrap with the crooks; but we manage to haul 'em in at last, every time, don't we, Asa?"

"Well, let's waltz around to the Golconda and see that our fair 'pard' gets home all right, then we will take a squint at the trail of his 'jags,' the banker-crook!"

During this conversation with himself Ace High drew near the Golconda—only, however, to meet a janitor locking up, just as he approached the door.

"Hello! Brown, what's the difficulty to-night?" he asked, as he pushed open the door just as the key was grating in the lock.

"Oh! It is you, Mister Asa!"

"Never knew the Golconda to close so 'arly before in all the five years I've been here, sir; no, never!"

"But, you see, sir, the gang got scart at young Banderson's heavy play, an' hev gone home to think it over, sir!"

"And the lady, Brown?"

"She was jist puttin' on her dry-goods in the hall a minnit ago, sir!"

To the large hall Ace High hurried, only, however, to learn of Ruby Rob that the Girl Sport had left the building a few moments before his arrival.

So, on he went through the secret entrance, to again find disappointment in missing the siren's carriage.

"It is a foolish, if not a dangerous move, for the girl to go home alone," and the detective again passed rapidly along the city street.

"I hope it is all right, but she has too many powerful enemies, to allow her going about unattended."

A few minutes' walk brought him in front of a large brick house upon a quiet street.

Not a ray of light came from the heavy-shuttered windows, but Ace High unhesitatingly sprang up the steep steps, and rung the door-bell.

Some moments of silence passed, then a small wicket, set in one of the heavy panels, slid back, and in the opening appeared a hideous black face that looked to belong to anything but a human being, though evidently that of an aged negro. Ace High pressed his face close to the wicket and whispered some words lowly.

The answer he received seemed to stagger him.

"Not here?" he gasped. "Do you mean, Aspa, that she has not arrived from the Golconda?"

"She has not come, master!"

"Heavens! Then I must find her at once!" and he reached the street at one bound.

"What can have happened?" he muttered, more than agitated at the non-arrival of his client.

"She cannot have proceeded at once to the mansion, for in that case she would have left some word behind."

"And yet—perhaps she did, and Ruby Rob forgot to tell me. But to make sure, I will go at once to the mansion, and if she is not there—"

"Ha! yonder is Paddy McCracken, the boy I sent to keep the captain in sight."

"He acts a little nervous—I will speak to him!"

The one in question, a lad of some twenty years, with pronounced Hibernian physiognomy, was still some distance away, but hurrying up the street at a swift run.

He was about to brush past the still disguised detective when the latter stopped him with:

"Hello, Paddy! How large is the stake you are running for?"

"Howly mither av Moses! An' is it yerself Ace High, darlin'?"

"Sure, Paddy! But have you lost the captain?"

"Arrah now; an' it's to the divil wid the captain, but Oi'm thinkin' av ther lady, bliss her swate face!"

"Ha! What mean you Paddy?"

"Aisy now, and tell me if ther young mistress hev arriv' home yet?"

"No! She is missing."

"Ow, the spalpeens! I knew it. An' phy didn't Oi hev ther arrum av ould Samson himsilf, sure, that I might hev lift ther murtheren divils weltering in their own gore afore they did it, wirra!"

"But come along me jewel, an' Oi'll tell yez all about it as we procede."

"Then you have seen Senorita Flash to-night?" and Ace High's face was unusually pale as he asked the question.

"Faix! An' Oi hev!"

"Yez see, darlint, I follied ther captain ter his hole in Chinatown, an' from there around back, an' to his favorite gambling hang-out."

"Then says Oi to meself: Paddy, me boy, ther captain is sulied fer keeps till morning, so supposin' we go back to ther dive in Chinatown an' take anither squint til his hang-out there; so I says ter meself 'All right, Paddy me boy, Oi'm wid ye! an' away we went—Oi an' mesilf."

"An' whin we got jist forninst ther Chinese house, may ther divil fly away wid me, if there wasn't a murtherin spalpeen av a false-whiskered feller a-carrying ther young lady in ther house from cuten a carriage!"

"How long age was that?"

"Not more'n foive minuits, sir; fer Oi flew away afther you loike a shtar-sphangled agle, sir!"

"Are we 'most there, Paddy?"

"It is jist ther fu'st door around yonder corner, sir!"

All this time the two had been sprinting along at a swift pace, but at these last words, Ace High uttered a sharp cry and bounded forward with the speed of a frightened buck.

"My God! It is that nest of crime and vice, run by Hop Ling!" he hissed: "It is death for me, if they recognize me within those walls; but I'll fight all Chinatown before they shall harm a hair of her head!"

"Ah! Here we are—now for some fun with the Celestials!" and springing up the steps, though the basement door was the usual mode of entrance to the place, he rung the bell.

Already had the Gambler Detective formed his plan of action, so when the door was cautiously opened by a greasy looking "pig-tail," the man-hunter assumed a half-idiotic expression of

countenance, as though but half recovered from an extended opium debauch, and entered the hall with a lurch that flattened the heathen behind the door like a flap-jack!

No one appeared to be observing them.

Ace High suddenly seized the Celestial by the throat and demanded in a menacing tone:

"Where is the 'Melican' girl that just came in?"

Fully believing the intruder was "opium-crazed," the "pig-tail" pointed frantically to a door some distance down the hall, intent only on saving his own life.

The detective comprehended the motion, and, taking the heathen with him, hurried to the door.

In the small room beyond stood a masked man, whom upon the instant he believed he recognized. But at this instant a slight scream came from beyond the door opposite, and dropping the squirming heathen, he sprang in that direction.

It was a startling sight he came upon.

Flash, the Girl Sport, struggling frantically for life and honor in the arms of a hideous and powerful old Chinaman.

One great leap forward and the Gambler Detective grasped the demon in his steel-like hands, raised him aloft at arms' length, then flung him straight through the curtained doorway into the midst of the Hounds of 'Frisco.

"My darling!" he cried, as he clasped the beautiful siren to his breast and pressed his lips passionately to her own.

"Sir!" disengaging herself from his embrace with an effort. "I believe our relationship was founded on a business basis only!"

"I beg your pardon, Senorita Flash," bowed the detective, growing suddenly pale.

"I forgot for a moment that I was only a gambler!"

"I assure you it will not happen again!" and he calmly drew a couple of heavy revolvers as a howl of frenzy, and the trampling of many feet, came from behind the curtains.

"You have your masculine suit on—remove your outer apparel and leave the building at once, while I cover your retreat."

"Be quick! They are coming!"

He had been watching those curtains narrowly, and with revolvers leveled, while speaking, but turned abruptly as a soft hand was laid upon his own.

Even while giving them, the girl had followed his directions to the letter, and none would recognize in the athletic young fellow at his side the Siren of the Golconda.

"Senor, I spoke hastily. Please forgive me. I shall not leave you to face that terrible gang alone. If you do not come with me, I shall stay here to fall at your side. Please come!"

He could see that she was terribly in earnest, and the gang were even now at the curtains.

His reputation as a duelist and man-hunter was too well established for a flight from the Hounds of 'Frisco to be construed into an act of cowardice, and taking the siren's hand he led the way into a side passage, just as the frenzied gang rushed into the hall, with the old demon Hop Ling at their head.

A few moments later two young men, neither of whom resembled the blonde mustached chap who had just entered, walked nonchalantly from the "dive."

## CHAPTER X.

### AN AWFUL EXPERIENCE.

THE ex-convict, "Melbourne," had not seen fit to inform Captain Nugget that he had not only located the house of the Bonanza Widow beyond mistake, but had even made a midnight rounds of the elegant mansion, with the end in view of a possible future entrance for "loot" on his own account.

But such was the fact!

So it was no wonder the ex-burglar led his pals unhesitatingly, and by the shortest route, to the scene of their criminal operations.

Thanks to Melbourne's previous investigations, they soon effected an entrance, when, after a second careful study, by the aid of a bull's-eye lantern, of the plan of the house, the experienced convict led the way without trouble to the room containing the escritoire.

"Ther 'ouse his dooced still!" muttered Melbourne, taking in the almost oriental magnificence of his surroundings with a practiced eye.

"Seein' has this 'ere widder his ter give ha big ball so soon, Hi'd 'ave supposed there'd be hanough sarvents h'n ther 'ouse ter make ha little noise hany 'ow!"

"But 'ere we his, me bloomin' coves! Right yere his ther desk has contains ther swag,



"Ello! Whun hof ther draw's his open ha tette—le's take a squint inside!"

His companions said not a word, but followed every sign of their leader with the utmost precision.

It was indeed true that the top drawer of the magnificent escritoire was open nearly two inches, so, bending the rays of his powerful lantern to the crack at the top, Melbourne peeped in.

The sight he saw within the drawer caused him to utter a cry of amazement.

"By ther 'ornes hof ha helephant! We've struck it ther fu'st thing!" he breathed.

"Jest look in thar, me bloomin' terantulars!"

Heinrich Frekelheim, and his companion, a negro, eagerly complied.

What they saw was enough to fully warrant their exclamations of wonder.

Strewn in glittering confusion upon the bottom of the velvet-lined drawer, was seen such heaps of gold, jewels, and bank-notes, as ever their wildest dreams of riches had never imagined.

"Mein Gott in himmel! Der must pe von millyun tollars dot draw's in!" gasped Frekelheim.

"So much ther better fer hus, then," replied Melbourne. "And now to 'ave hit hout hof thar!" and inserting his fingers in the opening he essayed to open the drawer.

But it seemed as firm as the wall itself.

"Wat hails ther bluddy thing?" he growled.

"Ketch a 'old, you terriers, and 'elp me pull!"

This the two others did, but they were little prepared for the catastrophe which followed.

Instead of moving outward under their combined efforts as they firmly believed it would, the drawer suddenly shot backward, as though moved by a powerful spring, firmly pinioning their twenty-four fingers, and making them at once prisoners, with no chance of escape!

"Orns o' ha helephant! Wat hails ther bloomin' thing?" howled the ex-convict, all regardless of the fact that he might alarm the house in his desperate efforts to escape from his dangerous as well as painful predicament.

"Hi might 'ave knowed hit was a trap w'en I see'd ther draw open—"

"Oh, stop yer 'owling, ye bloody tarriers! Ye'll 'ave ther beaks hon hus hif ye don't keep mum an' try ter git hout— Oh! by ther bloom-in' Lord!"

In his sudden attempt to quiet the groans and curses of his two pals, Melbourne chanced to glance over his shoulder, and it was sight of the form standing just back of him that brought forth that last ejaculation.

It was a tall form, enveloped from head to foot in a shroud-like garment of black.

Naught but two gleaming eyes, through slits in the somber cowl, could be seen.

And yet another discovery was in store for the three imprisoned crooks.

Not one form, but three were there, all enveloped in the same dark and funereal cloaks.

Not a word did they utter or a move did they make—simply stood there silently like sentinels upon the watch.

The negro was upon his knees, fairly prostrated with superstitious fear, Frekelheim was muttering and groaning despairingly, and Melbourne was cursing his luck roundly, when the three dark sentinels suddenly moved forward, released the crooks from their painful captivity, bound, gagged and blindfolded them before they could offer the least resistance, even if they had dared to, then dragged them slowly from the room into an adjoining apartment.

Then ensued what seemed ages of deathlike stillness, finally broken, however, by the sound of a hurried arrival of some person or persons.

It was evident a lengthy whispered conversation was being carried on, after which the three crooks were again seized, borne to a carriage, transported quite a distance, and finally unbound and thrust into a close, prison-like room, from which they were soon satisfied there was no way of escape.

Melbourne saw at once, however, that only the negro was with him—Frekelheim had been retained outside!

In fact, at this very moment the Dutchman was passing through a remarkable experience.

He, too, had been freed of his fetters, blindfold and gag, but ranged about him in grim and terrifying silence were five dark-robed beings, each with a cocked revolver pointed motionless at his breast.

Nor was this all.

Just in front of him, dimly discernible in the faint, ghostly light which pervaded the room, was a high, black-draped, throne-like chair, and

seated therein was the white and rigid corpse of an old man.

Yet, was it a corpse?

Frekelheim continued to glare at the face before him with bulging eyes and stilled pulse—his hair rising visibly, his skin contracting with horror, and his blood slowly congealing in his veins, for, gleaming phosphorescently from the haggard face of the corpse, two live eyes were looking straight into his own!

The horrified man essayed to flee, but his limbs were like blocks of ice! He tried to cry out, but his painfully contracted throat refused to act!

Suddenly a deep sepulchral voice smote his hearing. It put an atom of life into his freezing body, though he almost lost his senses from terror, for the sound emanated from the frozen, motionless lips of the living corpse.

The words used were German:

"Speak, man! and be warned to speak the truth, for see! you converse with the 'living dead!'"

"Let thy guilty soul shrink within thee, for see: about thy body is ranged the minions of the dark king—Death!"

"It remains with you if ye live or die! If ye answer my questions truthfully, let thy soul take courage, for ye shall go hence in peace, though thy hands are red with the blood of the innocent."

"Will you speak truthfully?"

"Yes, gladly!—only let me escape alive!" gasped the horrified man.

"You were once an officer in the organization known as the Order of Hounds?" asked those motionless lips.

"Yes!"

"You are even now a member of the remnant of that band, with headquarters in Chinatown?"

"Yes."

"You are also a member of that band of road-agents led by Lieutenant Redbird?"

"Yes."

"You are the secret messenger between Lieutenant Redbird and his superior—Captain Nugget?"

"I am."

"This Captain Nugget is also the superior officer of what is left of the Order of Hounds?"

"He is."

"This Captain Nugget ordered you, and two others to enter a certain mansion this night with burglarious intent?"

"He did."

"This Captain Nugget, while head of the terrible Order of Hounds, passes himself as an aristocrat in the best society of this city?"

"Y-yes."

"To save yourself from the most horrible torture and death you ever imagined, you will give the pass-word necessary to enter the secret council of the Hounds, as well as an explanation that will lead to the secret entrance to Lieutenant Redbird's rendezvous?"

"I—Oh!—y-yes, if it is worse than this!"

"Worse! I swear to you, you will pray aloud in your agony to exchange positions with the living corpse before you!"

"My God! Then I consent!"

"And lastly; you will swear by an oath more terrible than the one you took when you joined the Hounds, that you will, should the occasion arise, testify that you were present, and helped torture to death the man, woman and children whom Captain Nugget destroyed, to gain possession of their secret mine in the heart of the Haunted Mountains?"

"Great Heaven! You know of that!"

Only that one cry, then the wretched man, his hair turned white with terror, fell, a senseless mass upon the floor.

#### CHAPTER XI.

BONANZA BOB RECEIVES A FORTUNE, AND A STOCK.

BANKER BANDERSON sat alone in his private office, puffing furiously at a costly cheroot, while now and again he pulled a cut-glass flask of spirits from a drawer of his desk, and drank eagerly of its contents.

"Here I sit almost trembling with a nameless dread, when I should be one of the most composed of men."

"To-day I shall finger the ducats of this Bonanza Widow, yet I am shivering with fear."

"I cannot understand why Melbourne, Heinrich and Black Jim do not return. They should have been at the rendezvous before daylight, yet they had not returned an hour ago, and it is now past nine."

"They have not been arrested, as I learned when I called upon the chief of police with that snide reward for a lost pocketbook."

"Then what has become of them? Could they

have been so dazzled by the rich loot they found as to light out with it?

"No! Melbourne is too old a 'Hound' to forget his oath, and the consequences of breaking it!"

"I— Ah! Here comes Barry!"

The young "blood" was pale and haggard, as he threw himself into a chair and reached for the half-emptied flask which the banker had inadvertently left upon the desk.

"What is the matter, Barry? You look as though you had had an interview with a ghost!"

"No ghost in mine," was the reply. "I simply made a hundred thousand last night, and then lost it all at one plunge!"

This was, of course true, but as we know, it was not the true cause of his present woe-begone aspect.

The strange, not to say miraculous (to him) escape of the beautiful siren from the Chinese "dive," filled him with a nameless fear.

"The same old story, Barry? I should suppose you would know, by this time, that you will never make a successful gambler!"

"Oh, but 'twas a plot between Ace High and the Girl Sport of the Golconda to rob me—"

"What! Ace High in San Francisco?"

"Yes; he is bucking the tiger for all he is worth, and has won a fortune from the siren, it is said; but I believe, in fact, I am well satisfied, they are going 'snacks,' for some deep purpose!"

The banker leaned back in his chair, pale as a corpse.

"What sort of a looking person is this Girl Sport?" he at last managed to gasp.

"She is a she-devil, with the form and features of a Circe!" was the savage reply.

"But describe her!"

"Well, she is a trifle above the medium height; her form the perfection of symmetry; a tawny, oval face lighted by black eyes that are daggers of scintillating light, or walls of liquid softness, as her mood changes, and hair of the hue of midnight."

"I can only add that, when decked out with the hundreds of jewels, she wears at the Casino, she is rightly named—Flash!"

"But what is the matter, gov'nor? It is you who now look as if you had seen a ghost!"

"It is nothing—nothing! But tell me, when did this girl first appear in 'Frisco?"

"Why, don't you remember the furor she created at her first appearance at the Golconda, some three weeks ago?"

"I think I do—now!"

"Heavens! It might be—three weeks—just about the time that has elapsed since Redbird—"

"And you say this Ace High seems quite intimate with the Girl Sport?"

"Intimate! He hangs around her table from the moment she appears in the hall until she vanishes through the curtains at the back of her pavilion; and I have it on good authority that he escorts her home—though no one seems to know just where she resides—and even lives with her as her most devoted slave!"

The banker appeared for some moments lost in painful thought, while the son was busily engaged with the half-filled flask.

"I must attend to this at once! I have not the least doubt that this Girl Sport is none other than Aureola Raye, the only survivor of—"

"Why, even the name points to this fact—Aureola: flashes of light, and Raye—"

"It is she—and with the invincible Gambler Detective to back her—of course, he saved her from Redbird's hands! The Hounds must be unleashed!"

It was in this strain that the banker's thoughts, were flowing when there suddenly came a sharp knock upon the office door.

"Come in," called both Banderson and his son, in a breath.

The door opened, and a boy dressed in gorgeous livery entered and handed the banker a card.

Banderson read it with amazement.

The card bore the following address:

"CARLOS, DUC DI TORENTA,

"Madrid."

And beneath this was written with pencil:

"Upon important business for la Madame Cardiganne."

Banderson recognized the name.

He had heard of, but never met, the Spanish noble who had taken the upper society of 'Frisco by storm in the ten days since his arrival from Mexico.

"Where is your master, my lad?" asked Banderson.

"He is waiting your Honor's pleasure in the







senger, and the great coach set off up the trail with a flourish.

Dusk was fast falling when the heavily-loaded coach swung around on Crescent Spur, and the driver cracked his whip to start the mules down the opposite slope.

The old stager had just begun to congratulate himself that he would pass the dangerous spot without losing the rich Express he carried, when he was brought to a halt by a ringing voice close at hand, accompanied by the metallic clicking of several gunlocks.

"Halt! Pull up, Overland, and dismount!"

### CHAPTER XIII.

#### ONE AGAINST TWENTY.

WE will pass over the reply that the driver, Overland Sam, made to the command, as it would not look well here.

"This is gittin' too all-fired every-day-like!" went on the driver, when he had recovered his breath after his first outburst.

"It war on'y ten days ago that ye [lifted my Express boxes, an' hyar ye air ag'in. Now I'm givin' it to ye straight, lieutenant: either yew er I hev got ter quit!"

"I'll be tetotally hornswaggled by a knock-kneed mule ef I'm goin' ter stan' bein' held up ev'ry week by yew! yew slabsided, lantern-jawed, butter-brained, addle-pated son of a Mormon, yew! I'm done!"

The lieutenant had stood all this time in the glare of a half-dozen torches in the hands of his men, with folded arms, and an amused smile wreathed his mustached lips that showed just beneath his half-mask.

It was evident that the veteran driver, Overland Sam, was a privileged character with the outlaws, for he replied pleasantly:

"So you are done, are you, Sam? All right! I didn't know but you were wound up for all night."

"But, thanks—muchly! And now, with your permission I will take charge of those Express boxes once more; but I promise you, Sam, it shall not happen again this month!"

"Oh, yes; with my promise, of course—with two carbines pointed right at my gizzard!"

"Condem' yer, lieutenant, why can't ye guv a feller a chance?"

"Call out yer men, one at a time, an' I'll lick ther whole b'ilin' of ye!"

"An' I'd help yer in a minnit, driver!"

The voice came from the coach window, which had been lowered at the first halt.

The speaker was the passenger from Pilgrim's Camp. His head and shoulders were thrust out of the window, and plainly, in the bright glare of the torches, could be seen the red-hound charm as it dangled from his neck.

As the lieutenant's eyes rested upon the ornament, he started, then moved forward a pace.

The outlaw was about to speak when the other gave him a warning look, and said, in the maudlin voice of one very much intoxicated:

"Oh, come on ye durned frog-eater! Walk right up here while I knock a—hic—eye outer ye!" and as the disguised rifleman spoke, he thrust a brawny fist through the window, and shook it menacingly. But just here a diversion occurred.

In some manner the door became unlatched, and the defiant passenger, giving a lurch, came sprawling upon all fours to the ground.

Staggering to his feet with evident difficulty, he reeled toward the lieutenant crying:

"C-cuss yer d-dirty pictur'! I'll—hic—par'lyze ye fer—hic—thet!" and he threw his whole weight upon the wondering outlaw.

It was at this moment that a shrill whistle rung out, and the stage, driver, and passengers found themselves wrapped in impenetrable darkness.

The torches had been extinguished as if by magic, there came a confused hurrying sound of retreating footsteps, and the road-agent had vanished.

When the seeming inebriate had precipitated himself upon the lieutenant he had hurriedly whispered, close to the other's ear:

"I bring word from the captain; quick—vamosa!" And this was the real cause of the sudden departure of the outlaws.

But of course old Overland Sam did not know this, and he could only climb wonderingly back to his seat and drive on, after roundly cursing the "inebriate," the road-agents, and everything else he could think of at the moment.

The bandits had not retreated far.

Scarcely three rods from the trail they came upon a level, circular opening, entirely surrounded by massive boulders that had evidently fallen from the cliff high overhead.

A torch was hastily lighted, its glare showing

a dozen sleek steeds tied to a stout stake set at one extremity of the opening.

The lieutenant was the first to speak.

"You say you bring word from the captain; your communication must be of the utmost importance or I shall never forgive myself for letting those treasure-boxes slip through my fingers!"

"Well then, lieutenant, just grab yourself by the paw an' call it square!"

"Here is the paper ther captain sent, an' ef it don't prove important, then ther captain didn't hev time ter write it all down!" and the stranger passed over the cipher message he had taken from the unfortunate rider, far beyond Pilgrim's Camp.

The lieutenant turned his back upon his villainous looking band while reading the cipher, but the messenger observed that they exchanged significant glances, with now and then a dark scowl at their leader.

"By my life! but there will be some fun in these mountains shortly!" mused the rifleman.

"I believe 'the scamps are upon the point of mutinying,' and but for my presence with a loaded rifle they would actually drop the lieutenant where he stands!"

"Tell you what, Dicky, my boy, you are going to have your hands full when you take charge of this band of cut-throats!"

"But they will find old Dead-shot Dick on hand like a thumb—"

Just here the messenger was interrupted in his musings by the lieutenant.

The road-agent drew to one side, and motioning the messenger to him, asked:

"You are one of the Hounds of course, Hank?"

"I have the honor, lieutenant."

"And I suppose are in the captain's confidence pretty firmly?"

"Wal yes, rather."

"I take it, by this note, that he is in trouble, as he wants me to come to 'Frisco at once."

"Well now, I should remark! As near as I can find he is just about corrilled, as it war?"

"Yes, it must be so, or the captain would never think of asking me to help him; so I shall start for 'Frisco within ten minutes."

"And now, one word of warning: When you take charge of this band, you will be called upon to face more danger than you probably now conceive of—"

"Oh, I guess not, lieutenant. I see they be just on the p'int of rebellin' ag'in' ther present administration, but I guess they'll find a brick-in-a-hat when they kick ag'in' Hank Hoodlum!"

"I'm a bad man when I'm riled, lieutenant, an' I promise yer, when ye come back, ye'll find this downy chicken on top of ther heap!"

The lieutenant grasped the other's hand cordially.

"By Jove! you are a jewel, Hank," he cried, delightedly. "I have nothing more to say, for I see you can take care of yourself!"

"And now I will introduce you to the band, and give them my instructions."

This was soon done, after which the lieutenant mounted a superb animal standing near, and rode away in the darkness like the wind, and the disguised Dead-shot found himself suddenly the unwelcome leader of a rebellious band of outlaws.

"Now then, my lads, lead away to the rendezvous, and we'll soon become better acquainted," cried the new leader, as he mounted an odd horse that happened to be present.

"Yas, I reckon we will, Lieu—er, what mought we call yez, anyhow?"

"Wal, seein's ye hev already got a captain an' a lieutenant, ye mought call me colonel—Colonel Hank Hoodlum, at yer service!"

"All right, colonel, I reckon we will be acquainted afore soon!" and the speaker pulled his horse in just behind the colonel.

But the latter halted.

"I'll take keer of the rear, thank ye," he said. "I always ride behind, fer ye see, I can see in ther dark almost ez well ez I kin in daylight!"

The road-agent grumblingly complied with this hint to keep in front of his leader, and the cavalcade set off slowly along a rough narrow fissure in the giant cliff that seemed to gradually lead upward as they advanced.

If the outlaws at all doubted their new leader's statement that he could see in the dark, they were soon convinced of the fact, in a startling manner.

The fissure, or ravine as it might be called, was dark as Egypt, and to one unfamiliar with the way would seem to be all but interminable.

But at last the bandits filed slowly out of the dark pathway, to find themselves in a small

grassy plateau that was hemmed in by smooth-faced, towering cliffs—in appearance an extinct crater of a volcano.

A dozen picturesque pole "shacks" stood near the center of the retreat—just now lighted up by a couple of huge fires that were blazing a little way distant.

About the fires perhaps a dozen men were eating supper, they being waited upon by a number of comely young squaws—their wives.

The new arrivals were welcomed warmly by the others, and many questions were asked in relation to the treasure they had expected to capture from the "hearse."

One of the bandits was upon the point of making a statement of their undertaking, when he was interrupted, not to say startled, by a wild yell and a profusion of "cuss-words" from the rear.

The entire band started and looked in the direction of the sound.

This is what they saw:

A tall, wiry, dark-faced man, struggling with all his power, in the grasp of their new leader, who still remained seated upon his horse.

The outlaws started forward with howls of wrath.

Their leader's captive was the most popular man in the band, and one they soon hoped to recognize as their chief.

"Hold on, my lads!" cried the rifleman, easily restraining his captive across his saddle with one hand, while with the other he pulled from his belt a long navy revolver. "This man slipped off his horse, back in ther pass, with ther intention of puncturing my carkies with a knife as I rode past where he crouched, but ez I tole yer afore, I kin see in ther dark 's well 's I kin in daylight, so I natchely grabbed him by ther neck an' brought him along."

"Now, as we ain't acquainted yet, though he said back hyar we soon would be, I'll let him go—so! but if I set eyes on him after ten minutes, I'll shoot him on the spot. Now git!" and with a vigorous kick he sent the assassin lunging toward his companions.

The bandits again leaped forward.

"Down with the colonel and up with Black Jack!" they yelled.

The "colonel" slipped behind his horse, and the next moment the crash of a score of revolvers rung upon the night air.

### CHAPTER XIV.

#### THE "COLONEL'S" COUP D'ETAT.

IT was terrible odds for one man to take, but the rifleman stood off the savage crowd bravely.

There were over twenty of the outlaws, and every man was a fighter, though there seemed to be few "crack shots" among them.

The stranger had taken refuge behind his horse at the first advance of the enemy, and, with loosened revolvers, and rifle leveled across his saddle he coolly waited their first move.

It quickly came.

A dozen revolvers were discharged at the man and horse, and the latter fell with an almost human shriek.

As the horse fell, the rifleman threw himself flat upon the ground and brought his deadly weapon to bear upon the breast of the man called by the outlaws Black Jack.

"Halt, there!" he thundered, above the yells of the mad horde.

"Ten paces further and you are a dead man!"

At the sound of that stentorian voice the band involuntarily halted.

But not so the villain addressed.

It was his one consuming desire to become the absolute leader of these human vultures; and, almost insane with rage as he was at the trick their strange leader had played upon him but a short while before, he counted not his chances, but leaped forward as recklessly as before.

It proved to be a leap to his death, for a pencil of flame spurted from behind the fallen horse, a vicious crack from the little rifle, and the Red Birds of the Rockies had lost their chosen leader.

"Wal, boys, have you had fun enough with the green colonel, or shall we proceed with the matinee, and wipe each other out and every man bury his own bones?"

The "colonel" had risen, and seated himself nonchalantly upon his dead horse, though he dangled a couple of huge revolvers between his knees. It was evident the bandits were deeply impressed by the prowess displayed by the dead-shot in the last encounter, and they were now in just the right frame of mind to be won over by the little game of "bluff" which the "colonel" had in view.

"Now, boys, just s'pozen we reason together a little," he went on, as he crossed his legs, and



shoved his greasy sombrero to the backside of his head—thus displaying his bold features more fully in the glaring firelight.

"Now s'pozen you fellers were all mad as thunder at me—which of course you bain't, now that we've got acquainted—an' should haul off and sling cuss-words and lead at me till I got mad, too, and wouldn't have nothin' ter do with you fellers, but just go home and leave you ter yer fate, what'd be the consequence?"

"Why, jest this ere: You'd miss ther pleasure of havin' ther solidest man on ther Pacific Slope fer yer leader, and I'd miss ther honor of bein' chief of ther Red Birds of ther Rockies, and whar'd be ther gain?"

"Now, fellers, I've come here ter stay! You may think I'm givin' yer all wind an' bluster, but I mean every word I say, an' ef ther's any diff'rence of opinion atween us, I'm goin' ter give you a chance tew settle it right off."

"Some of you may think that Black Jack, thar, come tew his death by accident, but I'll convince yer ter ther contrary at once!"

"You man with a button on your hat, look out!"

Even before the last word was out of his mouth the "colonel's" right hand shot out, the revolver cracked, and the man just addressed jerked his hat from his head as if stung, and gazed blankly at the spot which but an instant before, was graced by a large metal button, on the crown.

"That warn't an accident either," went on the "colonel" in the same pompous tone.

"Why, fellows, I can't miss a mark, for the life of me! I've tried to time and ag'in, but always failed!"

"An' now tew business!"

"All yew fellers that want me tew be leader in place of Lieutenant Redbird, or Black Jack, thar, jest step out of the crowd whar I kin caress ye with these ere dazzling optics of mine; and anybody that hes any objections ter my holdin' ther office, let them jest stay whar they is, an' we'll settle it through the electoral college so darn quick, it will make ther spectator's ha'r curl an' p'raps grow him a stand-up collar!"

This last speech, coupled as it was with the preceding example of the "colonel's" reckless daring, did the trick.

With a ringing "Hurrah for the colonel!" every man sprung forward, each endeavoring to be first to greet him as their undisputed leader.

"Thank ye, boys," said the dead-shot, as he returned the grasp of each and every one of the desperate characters about him.

"I think myself that this 'ere ar' the best way ter settle ther deeficulty, tho' I do like ter fight most eternally!"

"And now another thing. My instructions say that you hev a treasure-vault in the cliff hyar some'ers, containing whole slathers of swag."

"Ther captain said a battering-ram couldn't break the entrance either in or out. But I'm a stranger tew ye, so, tew make everything sat's-factory all around, I perpose tew take a sort of inventory of ther loot, so you'll know jest how much I've lugged off if I skip out some dark night."

The whole band at once protested most warmly that they believed in their new leader implicitly, but they were finally prevailed upon to lead the way to the secret entrance of the treasure-vault.

The massive door was opened, the outlaws filed out slowly into the dark crypt, all unconscious of the desperate trap that had been set for them—but the colonel did not follow!

As the last man disappeared from view, the rifleman seized the great door, and with a mighty exertion, swung it to.

He then raised a small bugle to his lips and blew a shrill blast. The next moment a dozen blue-coated riders dashed upon the scene with sabers drawn.

## CHAPTER XV.

### A DESPERATE COUPLE.

BUT a few doors below the office of Banderson & Co., a well and stylishly-appareled man, wearing burnsides, mustache and imperial, paused abruptly at the sound of a startled ejaculation just in front.

The street was well-nigh deserted at the time—a heavily-veiled woman just in front, and a small boy but a few paces behind, and almost hidden behind a clothier's samples, being the only pedestrians in the immediate vicinity.

Very evidently it was the veiled woman who had made the low, yet startled outcry, for she had started back from the approaching gentle-

man, and now stood with visibly-trembling form, and one gloved hand pressed to her side.

Her other, the right hand, had been flung out, almost touching the man's face, causing him to make a sudden, startled spring backward. Quickly recovering himself, he stepped forward with lifted hat as he asked, hurriedly:

"Madam, are you ill? Can I be of any assistance to you?"

Without replying, the woman, with a swift motion, jerked away her veil, disclosing thus a darkly-handsome, though prematurely old, countenance to her two watchers.

The man sprung backward with pallid lips, as he uttered the one word "Mother!" while the youth behind the clothier's samples gave a low whistle of astonishment, and muttered:

"Be ther har-rup av ould Tara! but it is me landlady herself, so it is!"

Finally the woman spoke.

"So you at last recognize my claim to that title?"

"Curse the luck! How did you penetrate my disguise, and how came you here at this, of all times?"

"A mother's eyes are sharp—it is impossible for her to forget the face of her only son, though it be disguised beyond recognition of common eyes!"

"My business here is my own concern!"

"Then what in the name of Hades do you want of me?"

"Simply recognition."

"Well, you have got that, so move on!"

"Not so fast, my son," and the woman smiled almost wolfishly.

"Remember, it has been three years since last we met, and I would know how you are succeeding in whatever profession you have chosen."

"Ah! I tumble at last. You want money!"

"Not of you; it might be tainted, and I am living honestly now."

"What do you mean? Your words imply that I may be a villain!"

"Naturally! Your father was one before you; you come by it direct."

"But don't think for an instant that you can pull the wool over my eyes."

"I know what you are—that a hangman's noose is even now hovering above your head, ready to fall when the right time comes."

"And mark this well—that time is not far distant."

"Even now the bloodhounds are close upon your track; they have even run you to earth, and only await a word to spring upon you—"

"Curse you! Mother or no mother, I curse you to your very face!"

"Now get out of my sight, or I shall be tempted to cap the villainies you would lay at my door by matricide!"

"Go!"

"Poor fool! I will obey you; but it is to leave you to rush to your doom!"

"You are my son no longer, and though I could save you by a single word, I leave you to the fate that is close at hand!"

"Good-by!"

Without another glance at the man, who was now almost foaming with rage, the woman let drop her veil and shortly disappeared around the next corner.

Without having once noticed the young watcher before mentioned, and who had eagerly drunk in every word of the dramatic conversation above, the man turned, with a grating curse, and disappeared abruptly into the office of Banker Banderson.

Bonanza Bob was seated at his elegant desk, busily engaged in writing.

He was once more "on his feet," consequently he was in an exceedingly pliable state of mind, besides which he had just closed an investment on "change" which amounted to close on to a quarter of a million.

It was a scheme he had been studying up for weeks—one in which the man with the most capital would win.

He had the capital, no one would dare "buck" him with a quarter of a million in sight, and—well, he was so positive of success that he had another two hundred and fifty thousand to bet that he would come out of the deal one million dollars ahead!

So, when the man with "burnsides" burst so unceremoniously into his elegant office, Bonanza Bob did not scowl furiously as was usual of late, on the contrary merely looked a trifle surprised, and passed his visitor a chair.

"Is there the least danger of our being interrupted for the next hour?" abruptly questioned the stranger.

"Not the least," replied the banker, as he

opened a drawer in his desk, and pulled out a seven shot "Colt's," without taking his eyes from the stranger's face.

"Oh, don't get 'rattled,' old man," went on the visitor as he deftly removed his burnsides, mustache, goatee, and a black wig he wore beneath the tall dicer.

"I dropped my trade when I left the mountains!"

"Byrde Raynold!" gasped the banker. "That disguise would foil the sharpest pair of eyes in 'Frisco!"

"On the contrary, I have been recognized within ten minutes!"

"Hey? By whom?"

"The woman known as Christie Adante."

"What! your—"

"On spit it right out—yes, my mother!"

"But great Heaven! that is impossible! She is an inmate of a Louisiana insane asylum, and mad as a March hare!"

"So I supposed; but the fact remains that I met her within thirty paces of this door, and she knew me on the instant."

The banker seemed terribly affected by this disclosure.

"What can it mean Byrde?" he asked huskily.

"Perhaps it ha' something to do with the business for which you summoned me to 'Frisco."

"Ha! By Jupiter! Do you suppose Ace High and the girl could have hunted her up, and put her upon our track—"

"But that can't be, for this Flash, as she calls herself, has been here but a few weeks, and Barry informs me that she has been at the Gulconda every night without fail."

"You must have entered your dotage, old man!" said the stranger coolly.

"And I must confess you do not make a very happy selection of words! But we will not quarrel—there is too much at stake."

"What would you imply?"

"That if this girl Flash had hunted up my maternal ancestor as you suggested, it was done long before she appeared at the Gulconda."

"One would suppose so; but haven't I kept an eye on her all these years? and I know she has never been to Louisiana!"

"True, a man whom you suppose entirely faithful to your interests has sent you word from time to time—say four times a year—of her movements, and you know she has lived the life of an adventurous amazon in Arizona, Texas, and Mexico, but of her secret doings, her most intimate acquaintances, you can know nothing definitely."

"Now, it strikes me, from the fact that you seemed to have good authority for believing that she is 'going for' you, that she has been preparing herself all these years for an effort at revenge upon you for the part you took in leading the Hounds upon the night her family—"

"Don't mention that affair, Byrde! It was a bad move, though I would do it over again for the same stakes, even if they were not as big as I supposed them to be."

"All right then; we will consider that subject tabooed!"

"But now tell me all you can of the doings of the girl, and her detective pard."

This the banker-crook at once proceeded to do—telling all he knew, some things he firmly believed, and a great deal he surmised.

It could be seen that the stranger was most deeply interested—especially so in the account of the manner in which the mountain messenger, Hans Frekelheim, had been captured, and no doubt followed to the rendezvous of Chinatown, and his subsequent mysterious disappearance the night of the burglary.

"I guess you spoke correctly when you said 'the devil was to pay,' old man!"

"It is a wonder the last messenger, Hoodlum, was not overhauled."

"Not so very strange either, for it would be impossible for them to know that he was to start for the mountains; and besides he is not the man to be taken by surprise."

"The 'sleeping devil' in those black eyes is a certificate of his success in any undertaking he sets out upon!"

The stranger stared.

"I noticed 'the sleeping devil' all right but the man's eyes were of the color of steel!"

It was now Bonanza Bob's turn to start.

"You are mistaken, Byrde, for Hank Hoodlum's eyes are black as midnight itself!"

"Then the devil is 'to pay,' sure! The man I left in charge of the Red Birds has a pair of the steeliest steel-gray eyes I ever saw!"

"We are in desperate straits, old man! The band is in peril—you are in peril! Now which shall it be: The band or Bonanza Bob?"



"Save me, Byrde! Let the band go to Hades—save me by 'downing' Flash and Ace High. I will recognize you before the world as my legitimate son in the stead of Barry!"

The two locked hands over the criminal compact.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### STRANGE HAPPENINGS.

"CARLOS of Torrento, or 'Le Duc,' as he had finally become to be familiarly called by the majority of those lucky enough to claim his acquaintance, and Barry Banderson, were soon discovered to be almost inseparable companions.

Le Duc appeared to be some years the young "blood's" senior, yet he was such an accomplished sport, blackleg and gambler, and withal so extremely *blase* that he could readily accommodate himself to the companionship of men of any age, if they were only "fast" enough.

The "blood" seemed under a spell, and, although he had not sense enough to realize it, was completely within the power of the adventurer-grandee.

At the race-track and gaming table he had seen the foreigner win thousands of dollars in the coolest, and most matter-of-fact manner.

In the ball-room he had seen him the haughty noble, yet the lion, by all odds, of the evening.

After the regatta the Spaniard's oar was graced with the blue ribbon; he owned the fastest yacht on the bay; the richest turnout on the boulevard, and once young Banderson had acted as the grandee's second in an "affair of honor" in which his opponent fell at ten paces—an opponent no other man, in his right senses, on the Pacific Slope would have dared face in the *duello*.

And in a dazed way young Banderson wondered why the fates came to allow him to play Pythias to this wonderful man's Damon.

The "blood" had several times endeavored to gather prestige by showing the foreigner around to some of the "shady" haunts of the great city, but the mysterious man always went him one better by giving the full history of the place, along with an account of the lives of some of its most noted criminal *habitués*.

And thus their intimacy progressed until the grandee had become familiar with almost the entire history of the young "blood's" life; while, strange to relate, the titled blackleg was, if possible, more of a puzzle to his young associate than ever.

Thus matters stood when one evening young Banderson sat in his elegantly furnished suit of apartments, clad in full evening dress, and with a tall decanter and two glasses upon the table before him.

It was to be the night of nights for him.

Le Duc was to call in an hour, he was to visit the rooms of the grandee (a favor that had, as yet never been granted to one of his most intimate friends) and from there they were to take in the theater.

If he could but take a peep into the rooms of this most mysterious individual, he reasoned, he was positive he could learn something of the history of the wonderful man.

He little suspected how much that visit was destined to bear upon all his after life.

His cogitations were suddenly interrupted by a knock upon the door.

Wondering who his visitor could be, for it was much too early for the arrival of Torrento, who was always punctuality itself, the "blood" arose and opened the door.

It was only a uniformed messenger with a letter.

Dismissing the youth with a liberal fee, the young man again seated himself and glanced at the superscription.

As he did so his face clouded with fear and anger combined.

It bore the impress of a delicate female hand. "Curse the luck! She has found me, for that is the handwriting of the little Mexican fool, Bianca Codaza?" he muttered fiercely.

"Of course she wants more money—or more likely it is the old story of my promise to marry her."

"Well, I may as well read the scrawl, but she had better go slow, for I am now in a position to defy even blackmail, and besides, the Tilloson millions are too big a stake to risk for any more foolishness with the little 'Greaser'!"

Opening the letter he read as follows, his former bored and angry expression meanwhile giving place to one of the most intense amazement:

"DEAREST!—

"I know you will be terribly angry at my having dared to ascertain your lodgings, but you must re-

member that I might have come in person instead of sending this note. Now don't for a moment imagine this to be simply a begging letter—on the contrary, I am now in position to help you, to any reasonable extent, at any time you happen to encounter one of your usual financial difficulties. Remembering that you have not been so prompt with your calls of late as formerly, I will assume that you have not heard of the death of my father—that it has come to light that he was something of a miser—that he left me quite a sum in gold; that I am now filling an engagement at the Theater Parisienne in a leading part; or, that before he died my unhappy father informed me that I was not the child of obscure blood he has led me to believe, but a descendant of one of the proudest houses of Castile in Spain. I will say no more now, but—won't you come to me, dear? I love you as ever, and I want your help to establish my claim to the Codaza title and estates. There is no flaw in my pedigree, I am assured beyond doubt; nor in my life, either, but what you have made, and you surely will not be ashamed to possess the hand you have tainted when you know that hand holds a princess's title. Please come.

"Affectionately,  
"BIANCA."

The address was one in the bon-ton portion of the city.

Young Banderson pondered deeply.

"Will wonders never cease?" he mused.

"A week ago I was upon the verge of ruin. To-day I am backed by a cool million; am hand-in-glove with one of the wealthiest grandees of Spain; and now, to cap the climax of success I am offered the hand of a princess of Castile!

"But can I believe her? May it not be but a deep plot to entangle me?

"Pshaw! She has not brains enough for such a scheme, and— Happy thought! Torrento will know if there is a Codaza title!

"Stay! She is leading lady at the Theater Parisienne, and it is to the Parisienne we are to go to-night!

"By Jove! if her assumptions prove to be correct, it will be slightly to my interests to let the Tilloson slide and fall back upon my plaything, the Princess di Codaza! Ha! ha! ha!

"But there is Flash! Jove! I can't let her go! She is by far the most beautiful being I ever set eyes upon, and if I could only manage to get more intimately acquainted with the siren, I am sure my success would be certain! And she must have money—millions, to judge by the jewels she wears.

"Yet there is that devil, Ace High! Oh! if I could get Torrento at him once, I would be top of the heap, sure!

"Well, I'll think it over, and then 'feel' Le Duc a bit! The way things are shaping themselves for me, I am a blockhead if I don't make a ten-strike out of the pile somewhere!

"Hello! There are Le Duc's clay-banks now. Jove! ain't they steppers! But unless I am greatly mistaken I will yet blossom out with an outfit that will discount the grandee's two to one!"

And so we may naturally assume that the Spaniard found his young friend in the best of spirits, that the ride to the former's lodgings was one long to be remembered, and that it was almost like experiencing a cold bath in mid-summer to learn, upon their arrival, that the grandee's favorite saddle-horse, Brigand, had been taken suddenly ill during the master's absence, and demanded his immediate attention.

Showing his guest to the door of an outer apartment, the Spaniard invited him to enter and make himself perfectly at home, then hurriedly excusing himself, he left for an indefinite period, much to the gratification of the exuberant young "blood."

Young Banderson's first action upon entering the door was to start back with awe at the sight of the almost Oriental magnificence of the suit of apartments before him.

He had never imagined anything to equal the splendid hangings, pictures, furniture and bric-a-brac that now fell under his vision through open double folding-doors that connected the entire suit from smoking-room to bedroom.

But he finally recollected that he was there for another purpose than to indulge in a dream of admiration of the grandee's lodgings, and he passed into the second apartment, where stood a magnificent rosewood writing-table, littered with a pile of what appeared to be a draft of some old foreign manuscript.

As the "blood" bent over to examine the huge yellow sheets, his eyes rested upon a name that brought a startled cry to his lips.

The manuscript was of parchment—which accounted for its ancient appearance—and was closely written in Spanish, a language with which young Banderson was unusually familiar.

The name which caught his eye, as before mentioned was Codaza!

With feverish haste the young man began examining the papers.

They bore the date of: "Madrid, February 4, 186-," and were addressed to: "My dear friend, Carlos of Torrento, City of Mexico, Mexico."

And further could he believe what he read? the man he had known as Le Duc, was given the power of attorney by the court of Spain, and was charged with the task of finding, and producing one, Miguel Codaza, or his heirs; said Miguel Codaza being "next of kin," and last inheritor of the estates and title of Marquis del Codaza!

"So, she is a marquise, eh?" mattered the blood in a daze.

"It reads like a tale from the Arabian Nights! Jove! Was there ever such luck as mine? All that is left me to do is to marry the little fool before Le Duc finds her, and there I am, one of the wealthiest—

"By Jupiter! It almost escaped my memory, but it will never do to go to the Parisienne to-night—I will leave my regrets for the prince, telling him I am called suddenly away, and will at once proceed to put in my oar for the Codaza estates!"

## CHAPTER XVII.

### AMONG THE CROOKS.

It was Cotty, the crook, who had, upon the evening succeeding that which witnessed Ace High's narrow escape from the death-chair, discovered that, instead of lying stark and cold beneath the crib, the last mentioned individual was still in his place before the table presided over by the Girl Sport.

While pushing his way through the crowd that thronged the Golconda, he had come face to face with the invincible detective, and the unexpected meeting had almost paralyzed him with fright.

But the Gambler Detective had only said, with a smile that was worse than a menace:

"Ah! Cotty, my son, we meet once again! But don't get scared and run, chappy, for I am not ready to run you in yet."

"I am looking for that gentlemanly partner of yours; good-night!"

Then Cotty remembered his "partner" had, upon entering the crib that night, assumed a fair disguise; but nevertheless, he was much troubled in spirit, and wished that either he, or Ace High were a thousand miles from Frisco.

But the Gambler Detective did not seem disposed to leave the city just yet.

Indeed, at almost the very moment that Barry Banderson was looking over the Duque de Torrento's private papers, and less than a block from the grandee's lodgings, Ace High was waiking briskly along the pavement, with an expression of the deepest exultation upon his usually mask-like face.

"Everything is working to a charm!" he mused, glancing sharply though most adroitly into the face of every passer-by, as was his wont.

"The 'blood' is fixed for keeps, the Codaza girl can be depended upon for every dollar a man is worth, for the stakes she has in view; Bonanza Bob is making good headway toward the widow's heart and fortune, for I am sure he will declare himself before the ball is over at most, and my next move must be toward corraling the Redbird—

"By Jove! speak of the devil and he will appear!

"Now for a little fox-and-hound work!"

It was a wonderful disguise that the Gambler Detective could not penetrate with a single glance.

He cared nothing for the rest of the face, so that he could note his man's eye.

It was sight of the man called by Banker Banderson "Byrde Raynold," which brought the above ejaculation from the man-hunter's lips.

The bandit was most cleverly disguised, but he could not change the expression of his eyes, and these betrayed him to the watchful ferret just ahead.

The detective did not attempt to avoid his man.

On the contrary, he pretended to be intently studying the upper stories of the buildings on the hither side of the street while the outlaw was passing.

He had an object in thus exposing his undisguised features to the gaze of his bitterest foe.

Undoubtedly the outlaw would recognize him anyway, and by thus appearing to be unconscious of the other's presence, he would throw his quarry off his guard.

His ruse was entirely successful, for his quick



ear detected a cessation of the footsteps that had just passed, then he again detected their measured tread upon the pavement not thirty paces behind him.

"All right, Byrde, my boy!" he muttered. "You just come along with me, and we'll have more fun than seven dollars before we seek our downy couches."

"Now for a little 'cover,' just to improve our appearance, you know, then for a 'touch of high life' among the 'crooks.'"

As he said this, the detective stepped into a deep doorway close at hand, adjusted a false beard to his smoothly-shaven face, and an instant later was again in motion, with his evilly-smiling trailer close behind.

Ace High made straight for the "Crib."

It seemed a foolhardy thing to do, but the invincible Gambler Detective knew not the feeling of fear, and it was his choicest amusement to match his wit with that of some noted crook upon the latter's own territory.

But he was not the man to auction his life away for a song.

The bar-room of the Crib (into which I have already introduced the reader) was separated from the street door by a narrow, dark hallway.

Entering this hall, the traited detective, with a lightning-like motion, tore away his beard, hat, and coat, exchanging them for similar articles of a totally different appearance, which he habitually carried concealed about his person, then entered the room beyond in a make-up that would deceive the sharpest pair of eyes there.

Taking a half-burned cigar from his pocket, he quickly lighted it, then seated himself near the door, just as it opened to admit his exultant shadower.

The outlaw glanced quickly about the room, paused, took another hurried survey of the motley throng before him, and his face assumed a most comically-puzzled expression.

The detective, who appeared to be the roughest old bum in the Crib, was tipped back in his chair beside the door, apparently half-asleep, and with his cigar-stub just ready to fall from his lips.

As his eyes rested upon the form of the old bum, the outlaw stepped to his side.

"Hello, old fellow, are you asleep?" he asked shaking the other roughly.

"Huh-um-yah! What d'ye want? consarn ye!"

"Did you see a fellow enter here just ahead of you?"

"Naw! Hain't see'd nuffin' ner nobuddy. G'way 'n lemme 'lone— Say 'd you arsk me tew hev a drink?"

"All right! I'm yer oyster then. Lead ahead, stranger!" and as he became fully awake, though still very tipsy, the "rough" seized the outlaw's arm, and intimated his readiness to be piloted to the bar.

"Dry up, you fool! I hain't asked you to drink, neither do I intend to!" grated the lieutenant, in anything but a pleasant frame of mind at missing his man.

"What! hain't yew goin' ter treat, ter pay fer my tellin' yew about the feller?"

"You hain't told me about him yet. Point him out to me, and I will fill you so full of 'slush' that you can't walk!"

"By the bawlin' Bacchus! I'm yer man!"

"Jest tell me his handle, or how he looks and I'll spot him in a jiffy, for I knows every galoot that kin git inter this hyer Crib—even tew yer-self!"

"What? you know me?"

"Sart'in I does, leftenant, though I hain't sot eyes on ye fer some three years!"

"Remember me, don't yer? Old Spotter, ther crook."

"I don't pla— you just now, but I guess you are all right."

"But find my man, Spotter, and I will give you a 'tenner!'"

"By Jerusba! That's a whole week's drunk!"

"What's yer man look like?"

"Tall, straight, dark-face, wears a heavy false beard and plaid coat. He entered just ahead of me, but for my life I can't discover him in the crowd."

"I may as well tell you he is Ace High in disguise!"

"Jupiter! Ace High! If I can find him the boys'll set 'em up fer the next month free!"

"Here goes!" and the bum at once was lost to the bandit's sight in the crowd.

Ten minutes of anxious search on the part of the lieutenant had passed, when he felt a slight pull upon his sleeve.

Turning, the outlaw saw standing at his side a form, the sight of which brought a low cry of wonder from his lips.

"Father! How came you here?" he asked in a low tone. "I thought you had gone to call upon the Widow Cardigan!"

"I did, Byrde; but she was out, so I came here to see what I could run on to."

"Well, you are just in time. Ace High is here in disguise, and unless I am greatly mistaken he does not even suspect that I am on the lookout for him!"

"Ha! Are you sure he is here?"

"I know it! for I followed him here, and have got a man now looking for him—"

"Then let us get out at once!"

"But why not down the bloodhound now?"

"For this reason: If your man finds him, the gang will make short work of him."

"But it is sure to raise one the biggest rows the Crib has ever witnessed, and if we should become mixed up in it, it would be good-by for you, and not much better for me. You must remember the Crib is under police surveillance!"

"You have got a long head, old man, and are right, of course."

"Come, let's skip!"

"Suppose we drop around to the rendezvous, and see what the Hounds are about!"

"Just the thing; but I would like to see this gang down the so-called invincible, Gambler Detective!"

"Of course; but we have too much at stake to take the risk of exposure in a police raid. I am well satisfied that Ace High will trouble us no more!"

And the two left the Crib together.

Ordering a carriage, and paying the driver well to inform them the moment they were followed, for it was just possible the detective might have "spotted" the thinly disguised banker-crook and attempt to follow him, they were driven rapidly to within a couple of blocks of old Hop Sing's "dive."

Dismissing the driver, after gaining his assurance that he had kept a sharp lookout for trackers, and had discovered none, the two crooks soon entered the Chinese dive, and the banker, falling in behind, was piloted by his so-called son to the door of the council-chamber of the "Hounds."

After a slight pause here for the challenge and countersign, they were admitted to the hall, which was occupied by some twenty men of almost every position in life.

It is a matter of history that no criminal organization of the Old or New World was so numerously represented by men of apparent high and unblemished reputation as was the "Hounds of Frisco" at one time!

This was the picture the two new arrivals looked upon: At the head of a long table, surrounded by a full dozen of the best-known business men of the Golden City, sat an eminent, well-known judge, complacently listening to the details of an atrocious murder committed the night before by the narrator, and dividing the derived spoils among the gang, while at the further side of the room were stationed the lower rank of the company, a most murderous-looking set, regaling themselves from a large bottle, and waiting their turn at giving in their reports to the leader.

As his eyes fell upon Banderson, the judge arose and said:

"Hello, Nugget! We thought you wasn't coming, and I took your place. Here, finish dividing the swag!"

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### AMONG THE HOUNDS.

A CURIOUS expression flashed over the banker's countenance.

"Oh, never mind, judge," he returned. "Now that you have your hand in, just finish the business, as I can stop but a moment."

"You must be out of your senses, captain! I should suppose you would be the last one to propose breaking one of our most stringent rules. You must know that it is your place, and yours only, to attend to this matter when you are here."

"True! I did not think; but I must hurry through, for I have an appointment," and the captain seated himself at the table and began counting over the plunder before him, apparently not noticing the puzzled looks his men bent upon him the while.

He soon had the money arranged upon the table in sixteen piles, and said:

"Here are four hundred and sixty-four dollars to be divided among the sixteen men present, making twenty-nine dollars for each—"

"But what ails you to-night, captain?" interrupted the judge. "Do you mean that we shall share and share alike with the crowd there?"

"If you are to manage the matter like that, where does our extra money come from to get the others clear of the 'beaks' when they are caught?"

What answer the banker-crook would have made to the above questions must forever remain a secret

for at the moment the judge ceased speaking, the heavy curtains at the further end of the room were brushed hastily aside, and beneath them rode the tall figure of—Captain Nugget, *alias* Bonanza Bob Banderson!

There ensued one awful moment of deathlike stillness.

It was broken by the man at the head of the table, or Banderson number one, who leaped to his feet, crying, as he pointed a heavy revolver at the other's head:

"On your lives, Hounds, secure that man!"

"It is some trick! He is a spy in disguise—perhaps Ace High himself!"

At mention of that dreaded name the gang sprung forward as one man, and before the new arrival could offer the least resistance he was in the merciless grasp of the Hounds of Frisco!

The prisoner was livid as a corpse, and seemed ready to burst with an emotion that resembled both fear and rage.

"And now I command you to secure that man this instant, or by the Eternal Heavens! I will hand every mother's son of you over to the law the moment I am freed, if I have to stretch hemp as a consequence!" the imprisoned man at last managed to hiss between his clenched teeth, his mouth frothing, and his burning, blood-shot eyes glaring like balls of fire upon the cool, unmoved face of the other.

The startled and puzzled band turned to look at Nugget number one.

He had moved around so as to place himself between the captured man and the curtained exit, and now stood calmly surveying number two over his cocked and leveled revolver.

The band also discovered something else—something that Nugget number one could not see from his position.

But a few paces back of him, and covering his form with two cocked revolvers, was the form of Byrd Reynold, the mountain bandit.

The long, low hall, the fear-drawn or scowling faces of the outlaws, the two motionless figures, each holding loaded weapons, in the foreground, and all lighted but gloomily by the flaring lamp upon the table, made a striking and dramatic tableau.

The band seemed still too dazed to obey the command of number two, notwithstanding his significant threat; but not so with Lieutenant Redbird.

With a quick leap he reached Banderson's side and gave a quick jerk upon his long iron-gray beard.

To the further amazement of the gang it came off easily, and they instantly saw through the trick that had been played upon them!

Not one there but instantly recognized in Banderson number one the invincible man-hunter, Ace High, the Gambler Detective!

But the detective was not idle.

With one quick, merciless blow he sent the man who had so adroitly unmasked him reeling the whole width of the hall, to fall, bleeding and insensible, in a corner.

It was evidently the cornered man's intention to make a bold dash through the curtains, and thus, by the well remembered passage, to the street, but in this he was foiled by the hasty entrance of the armed guard outside, who had been attracted by the unusual disturbance in the council-chamber.

"Shoot him! kill him!" yelled Nugget, as he tore himself away from his captors.

"Or, better still, take him alive, that he may die a thousand deaths!"

"Five hundred dollars to the man who first lays hands upon the man-hunter!"

The detective had turned, as he drew a second revolver, to face those so close behind him, and this movement proved his doom.

A dark-faced, villainous-looking thug sprang, with one powerful leap, from the crowd that surrounded Nugget, and threw himself with full force upon the unprepared spy, just as he, with a quick snap shot, sent a bullet plowing through the shoulder of the foremost guard.

All three fell to the floor with a resounding bang—the guard howling and cursing with pain, the detective almost senseless from the shock of the other's gigantic leap, and the dark-faced Hound on top with a hand at his victim's throat.

The gang now rushed forward, and in a moment Ace High was a prisoner, bound beyond any possibility of escape.

"You are a hero, Pedrol!" cried Nugget to the man who had made the all-important capture, "and you shall be the one to hoist the man-hunter over the divide."

"Now let's attend to Redbird."

The stricken bandit was soon himself, and he recounted in detail the manner in which he had been duped by the detective at the Crib.

It was then decided that their dreaded prisoner should die that night, and at once.

The helpless man was conveyed to a dungeon like cellar beneath the infernal dive, where he was lashed and relashed to a stout wood bench and left in the hands of his villainous executioner.

As the last of the gang left the dungeon they heard the first shriek of agony from the doomed man. But if they had been a few moments later in leaving, they might also have heard him exclaim:

"Dick, my lad, you are a jewel!"

## CHAPTER XIX.

### AN UNSEEN FOE.

THE banker-crook sat in his elegant office, puffing furiously at a cigar, and wearing a look not pleasant to see.



Opposite him, with one eye closed by a bandage and his left arm in a sling, sat Byrde Raynold. Each wore a look, that much resembled fear.

It was one of the rules of the Hounds, that executions of the kind intimated in the last chapter should be accomplished in secret from the rest of the gang; thus, no witness could appear against the executioner under any circumstances.

So after a reasonable length of time had expired, the band, with Nugget at their head, repaired to the dungeon before mentioned, to look for the last time upon the mangled body of their most dreaded enemy.

But what was their consternation to find the dungeon entirely deserted—captor and captive having disappeared without leaving a trace of their presence behind.

But this was not the only cause for the dark look that Bonanza Bob now wore.

There was trouble brewing for him "on change." Some one, he could not discover who, had penetrated his gigantic stock scheme, and was now fighting him with a half million dollars in sight, and with evidences of much more back of it.

Banderson had immediately advanced a half-million to bolster up his tottering "corner," hoping thus to bluff off his unknown opponent, but what was his amazement, not to say terror, upon the morning in question, to learn that the mysterious speculator who opposed him, had brought the rival stock to the three-quarter limit, with good chances of winning in the stupendous deal.

The banker had grown ten years older in a single night.

He had been so sure of coming out of the deal a round million ahead, that the news of the rival operations had nearly paralyzed him.

He had but a quarter of a million of available funds left, and as they were securities of the Bonanza Widow, their negotiation was liable to be stopped if the least whisper of his speculations should reach her hearing.

There was but one chance left him, and that was so very slight, it made him tremble to think of placing his hopes upon it.

The festive banker had, for some time, been paying assiduous attention to the Bonanza Widow, and he was well-satisfied that he had only to offer himself to be chosen 'manager for life' of her untold millions.

Once her husband, and with the right to use but a fraction of her great wealth, he would be safe, and she need never know anything about it.

But such a thing would take time, and was hardly to be thought of, for in three days at the most his rival was sure to "plunge" another quarter, and that would necessitate his parting with the last dollar of his borrowed fortune, and that meant an ignominious exposure and a prison, unless his rival was bluffed off at the last moment, which was not probable.

"There is but one move left you, old man!" at last Raynold announced gloomily.

"You must make a try for the widow's hand, and if successful insist upon an early wedding—advertise your coming marriage with the female Cæsar for all it is worth, then float the securities and swim on your expectations until after the marriage!"

"That is all very well; but if she should refuse me?"

"There's nothing like trying! As far as appearances go you are safe enough in that quarter."

"If she should refuse you—well there is safety among the Hounds, or a band of mountain free-lances!"

Banderson groaned at thought of giving up his present life of ease and power, for one of mountain hardships, or the hunted existence of the hoodlum.

But before he could put his thoughts into words, the door opened, and Barry the sport entered.

His rather handsome features were wreathed with the most exultant smiles, and he seemed ready to burst with some weighty secret.

"What is the matter with you, Barry? You must have struck something rich to judge by your appearance," said his father in a wondering tone.

"Well, I should remark that I had!"

"What is it?"

"I am married!"

"W-h-a-t?"

Both his hearers sprang to their feet as though shocked by a galvanic battery.

"What are you driving at, Barry?"

"I'm giving it to you straight."

"Then who is the new Mrs. Banderson?"

"Her name was Bianca Codaza!"

"Fool! Do you mean to say that you have married that nameless jade, when the Tilloson millions were almost within your grasp?"

"That for the Tilloson millions," snapping his fingers derisively, "and in place of being the nameless jade you insinuate, my wife is the Marquesa del Codaza, and one of the richest women in Spain!"

The "blood" then went on to tell all he knew of the case, of the letter, of the Spanish manuscript he had come upon in Le Duc's rooms, and finally of his secret marriage with the last of the line of Codaza only the night before.

"Then you are really married?" asked the banker, a little anxiously.

"Just as solid as the law can make it!" was the reply.

"And now I go to prepare for the Cardigan ball, for I think it is Le Duc's intention to introduce her there as the Spanish heiress!"

"It maybe all right but it looks a little suspicious to me!" muttered the bandit, as he left the room some time later.

## CHAPTER XX. THE "HORROR IN PAINT."

THE night of the long-talked-of, and much-prepared-for *bal masque* given by the Bonanza Widow at last arrived.

The magnificently-illuminated mansion and grounds seemed a bit of fairy world, and the resplendent interior was crowded with the glittering maskers—the bon-ton of Frisco.

Soft strains of music floated through the richly-decorated rooms from cunningly-concealed orchestras, dozens of liveried servants answering the slightest sign from the guests with the richest ices and sweetmeats, and it was little one there could imagine the strange happenings that would take place beneath that roof before those thousand lights were dimmed by the morning.

Two gentlemen, dressed as English cavaliers of the time of James I, in slashed doublets, trunks and hose, with wide ruffs, plumed hats, and flowing cloaks, might be seen lounging about the great picture gallery arm in arm, interestedly examining the costly works of art with which the room was lavishly furnished.

At one side of the long apartment, in a dimly-illuminated alcove across which a heavy curtain was half drawn, stood a richly-carved easel holding a large painting that was closely veiled.

"Ah! What have we here, Byrde?" cried the elder of the two, as his roving eye caught sight of the veiled easel.

"A veiled picture always excites my curiosity. Let us investigate," and he led the way to the curtained alcove and entered.

Unlopping the vail at one corner, the elder man pulled it aside, and the painting that had so aroused his curiosity stood revealed in the dim light.

One glance he cast upon the canvas, then reeled back with a low, wheezing cry, and would have fallen insensible had not the other promptly caught him.

"What in the name of Hades is the matter, father? What have you seen?" cried the younger cavalier, glancing beyond the picture almost fearfully.

"Great God! don't you see? Look there!"

The one addressed followed with his eyes the direction of the other's pointing finger until his glance rested upon the painted canvas, when he, too, sprang backward, uttering a startled oath.

Both men continued to gaze as though fascinated by the scene portrayed upon the cloth, their faces whitening beneath their fringed masks and their forms trembling as though chilled with an ague!

The scene which the painting represented was one of wild mountain grandeur.

The foreground was a burning log cabin, which lighted up the surrounding pines and the distant, indistinct line of the rugged mountains with a strange, ghostly light.

Topping upon the brink of a black, wind-swept gorge, a lightning-scarred pine threw out its bare, skeleton arms.

Bound to its barkless trunk, his grizzled locks tossing wildly in the night wind, his glaring eyes and anguish-distorted features set like an alabaster mask at the scene of horror that was being enacted before him, was a man of more than middle age, covered with wounds from which the crimson streams could be seen slowly trickling.

And that scene!

A dozen rough, wild-looking fellows scattered about in front of the burning cabin, half of them having just succeeded in bursting open a huge iron-bound chest, thus disclosing to their gloating gaze a fortune in glittering nuggets and sacks of gold-dust; another having just driven a knife flush to the hilt into the breast of a mere lad; three others, each with the mangled form of a child held exultingly aloft; and the last, the chief, evidently, holding a woman by her long, disheveled hair and holding the keen point of a Bowie at her white, shapely throat.

It was a strange, a terrible subject for a painting, yet it showed in every detail the touch of a master hand.

Raynold was the first to recover his voice. "Hounds of Hades!" he hissed, chokingly, "what trick is this?"

"'Twas no chance, nor accident that placed this infernal picture here! It is some deep plot concocted by our enemies, and by the Eternal Heavens! I will find out what it means before I leave this house!"

"Come, let us go—I shall suffocate here!"

"Oh, that terrible scene! It is exact in every detail. Yes, it was placed there for a purpose—I feel it! She painted it—Aureola, or Flash. She may be here to-night—and the devil, Ace High! They will win. I have felt it all along. Come! Let us leave the house, the city, the country—anywhere, to get rid of them, and to forget that terrible scene!"

"That will do, old man. You are losing your grip!"

"I won't leave the country, nor the city, nor the house, until I have unraveled this cursed mystery!"

"Go brace yourself up on a stiff glass, for I may need your help before morning."

"And, besides, you must come to some decision with the widow," and he turned to lead the way out of the alcove.

As he did so, a female figure darkened the curtained exit.

Her costume was a jewel-bespangled pink domino, a gilt crown graced her shapely head, from which fell a long, cloud-like veil of white, and her face was hidden behind a mask.

But the two cavaliers had no difficulty in recognizing in the pink domino the mistress of the superb establishment, Madame Cardigan.

"Oh, seniors! If you haven't found that 'horror

in paint,' as I call it. I hid it away in that alcove so that no one would get the horrors looking at it, and here it is found the first thing!" she cried, as she seemed to try to penetrate the disguises of the two before her.

"We are very sorry, madam, for having intruded, and humbly ask your pardon—"

"But you must not! I assure you it is no intrusion."

"You are more than welcome to examine the picture, but it is such a terrible subject I can never bear to look at it; and how I ever came to buy it is a mystery."

"Then you know the artist?"

"Oh, no; that is, I never saw her before, nor since, for that matter."

"What! you would have one understand that the painting is the work of a woman?"

"Yes, or, rather, a girl. At least she claimed to be the artist, though it is just possible she stole it."

"It was in Mexico, four years ago. She affirmed the scene here displayed really happened, but of course I could not credit that story!"

"Do you suppose that ever a man lived in the nineteenth century inhuman enough to stab that innocent boy to the heart like that?"

"She little thinks she is speaking to the murderer himself!" thought Redbird.

"And look at the wretch in the foreground!" pursued the widow. "See him wrench back the woman's head, and slowly push the sharp blade into her delicate throat! The man that could do such a thing could stab his own mother to the heart!"

The disguised banker uttered a low, gurgling groan, and seemed about to fall.

"No wonder the story fills you with horror! I shall destroy the painting to-morrow, and yet, it holds a strange fascination over me."

"Do you know the name of the artist?" asked Raynold.

"It has slipped my memory: but here are the initials upon the bottom of the canvas—A. R."

"Come, let us go!" muttered Banderson.

"Now is your time to try your luck with the widow!" whispered the bandit.

Bonanza Bob took the hint, and led the lady toward the conservatories.

As Raynold was about to leave the alcove a few moments later, his attention was attracted by the rustle of a curtain on the opposite side of the gallery, and the next moment an unmasked face appeared for but an instant.

"Ace High!" yelled Redbird, leaping frantically toward the curtain.

## CHAPTER XXI. DUEL IN MASK.

THE bandit went through the curtained opening with a tiger-like spring, unmindful of what might be beyond.

He alighted upon a broad gallery at the rear of the mansion.

Slowly retreating, and but a few paces away, was the tall form of a man in the costume of an Algerine Bey, his long mantle pulled aside revealing the terrible curved Moslem dagger bound to his jeweled girdle.

"Tis he!" hissed Redbird, as he prepared to spring upon the unsuspecting form before him.

"I noticed the diamond-studded Mussulman cap, with its peacock plume—"

"I have you now, hound! But one of us leaves this place alive!" and the bandit essayed to clutch the other by the throat.

But with a quick, supple turn of his body, the Algerine escaped the clutch, at the same time dealing his antagonist a crushing blow in the breast that sent him headlong from the gallery, to roll among the shrubbery below.

With a light leap the Algerine followed him, and as the other gained his feet the two stood face to face.

"You devil! I will have your life, or leave my dead body in this garden!" snarled the bandit, as he made a savage lunge with his Bowie that was adroitly parried by the Moslem's curved blade.

"I know not who you are, senior, nor do I care to know. I am always anxious to accommodate my friends in a matter of this kind, and will promise you all the amusement you can wish before we have done!" remarked the Moslem, in a cold, even tone, that sent a chill to the bandit's heart.

"Now for it!" and the heavy blades crossed with ringing clatter that told of deadly purposes back of them.

The bandit fought wildly, desperately! The Moslem was cool, almost to carelessness.

Redbird was becoming winded as the fight went on, while the other seemed to be but just getting into fighting trim.

Twice the bandit had left his breast exposed in recovering his savage lunges; and twice the Moslem had struck him a light blow with his fist.

"Curse you! What is your game? Why don't you strike home when you have the chance? I shall!" hissed Redbird.

"I do not want your blood!" was the reply.

"I merely accepted your challenge for the practice I could derive from the fight."

"I shall tire you out—it is the only way to deal with such stubborn fools as you!"

This taunting speech enraged the bandit still more, and he renewed the attack with redoubled zest.

At this moment a shout was heard near at hand, and a richly appareled masker and half a dozen servants rushed upon the scene.

"Le Duc! lieutenant! What does this mean?"



cried the new arrival, whom Redbird at once recognized as Barry Banderson.

"What's that? You are not Torrento!" gasped the bandit, starting back from his antagonist.

"At your service, señor!" was the reply, as the duelist removed his mask, thus disclosing the well-known features of the Spanish grandee.

"But I am at a loss to know the offense I have committed, and which you are so eager to wipe out with my blood."

"Heavens! There is none. I did not dream it was you. Can you ever pardon my terrible blunder, prince?"

"Easily, *amigo*! There is no harm done. Come, let us forget the occurrence over a bottle of wine," and the grandee led the way toward the mansion.

The bandit had, as yet, taken no notice of the servants that had arrived upon the scene with young Banderson, but as he was about to step through the open window he glanced back.

As he did so he uttered a sharp cry, and reeled insensible into Torrento's arms.

Three of the servants were Fräkelheim, Melbourne and Black Jim!

## CHAPTER XXII.

### A LOVE SCENE.

Two persons sat in a shadowy nook of the conservatory that was ingeniously protected from observation by a broad-leaved flowering palm.

They were Banker Banderson and the beautiful young widow.

"My beautiful one!" cried the cavalier, as he threw himself at the feet of the girl-widow, but forgetting to remove his mask. "It is to tell you the story of my mad, uncontrollable love for you—"

"Oh! you must not talk so—I cannot listen to such words—you have no right—"

"Then give me the right. You will never find such love as mine, and surely I have no rival for your affections!"

"You are mistaken, señor. My heart is already given to another—"

"What? Ha! The Spaniard, Torrento, then, is your lover!"

"You are mistaken again, señor. I know not in what light the prince regards me, but I could never regard him in the manner you suggest."

"No; the one to whom I have given my heart, though he has never declared himself, is an American, a good, true man who has my interests entirely at heart, as I know by the manner in which he has safely invested the fortune which I intrusted to him but a few days ago—"

"Can I hear aright—I am not mistaken! You have not recognized me!" and the banker crook tore the mask from his features.

The woman uttered a startled cry.

"Robert!" she exclaimed, essaying to rise and flee.

"What have I said! I did not know—you should have made yourself known! Oh! Let me go—"

As for Banderson, he was at once transported into the seventh heaven of delight.

Clasping the fair form in his arms, he poured forth the passionate appeal which he had committed to memory for the occasion, and his words were not uttered in vain.

"Then you will be mine, Anita; say that you will be mine!"

"Yes, Robert; I will be yours, for I have loved you from the first moment of our acquaintance."

"And you will not keep me waiting long for my bride?"

"No; I will waive my prerogative, and let you set the time!"

"Then I say at once, my beautiful one! Tonight—"

"Oh! What can you be thinking of? What would people say?"

"They would say I had won the most beautiful bride in the world! You are ever striving to entertain your guests—what would be more interesting than a wedding at midnight?"

"It is a great temptation—such an adventure; I have half a mind—"

"Then you consent?"

"Yes!"

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### THE END OF THE DRAMA.

The most interesting part of the magnificent entertainment was a series of amateur theatricals, performed upon a temporary stage at one end of the great ball-room, comprising tableaux, comedies, and a brilliant drama.

The acting was perfect, the costumes were superb, and the audience applauded accordingly.

The drama of five acts came last, and was the most interesting thing on the programme.

The gay audience were worked up to the highest pitch of excitement by the intricate workings of the first four acts, and could scarcely curb their impatience until the grand *coup* of the last act.

It would require another book of this size to give in detail all the curious workings of the interesting piece, so let it merely be said that the hero bravely defeated the machinations of his enemies, and in their very presence—they were in the hands of the law—wedded the heroine, whom he had saved from their clutches.

The first scene of the last act portrayed the manner in which he trapped the gang that had sworn to ruin him, and the last scene was that of the marriage.

As the curtain rose for the last time the audience arose *en masse* to catch every detail of the tableau before them.

Upon the stage, which represented most naturally a cave, and in the most natural positions imaginable, were a full score of villainous-appearing bandits, bound and gagged and guarded by a file of blue-clad police.

Directly in front, and facing the audience, stood a robed and belted Episcopal clergyman, about to begin the ceremony of a real marriage.

As the curtain rose a slight disturbance arose in the rear of the audience, but it was quickly suppressed, and none there so much as imagined that a man had been seized, bound and gagged in their very midst.

And now the deep tones of the clergyman sounded through the great hall, the couple before him answered promptly, and the spectators were preparing to give the great act the tremendous applause it merited.

Many recognized in the bride the mistress of the mansion, but they hardly dared dream that it was a real marriage they were witnessing.

And now it was over: the minister congratulated the happy pair; the groom turned to salute his bride as she drew the heavy veil from her features, then started from her with a shriek of rage and despair that reverberated through the long rooms like the wail of a lost soul.

The bride turned. It was not the girl widow, but a woman of forty, once handsome, but with seams of care and trouble cragging her dark features, now lighted up by an expression of wild, exulting triumph.

The groom, whom they recognized as the elegant Bonanza Bob Banderson, had sunk almost insensible into the arms of two of the blue-clad policemen.

Silence like death reigned over the great hall.

A gentleman stepped to the front of the stage.

It was Carlos, Duque del Torrento.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "an explanation of the strange occurrences that have just taken place, and that will shortly take place, is no more than your due; so, if you will give me your attention but a few moments, I will relate to you a true history of one of the most wonderful romances on record."

"Thirty years ago, two cousins, one a man, the other a knave, left the ruined home of their uncle in Virginia to seek their fortunes in the then unknown West."

"The man was possessed of good business principles, the knave was possessed of no principles whatever."

"Twice the man accumulated a fortune, only to be ruined by the false professions of the knave."

"I have not time to give the full history of the lives of these two men. Suffice it to say, the man, after a time, met, loved and wedded the daughter of a Spaniard of noble blood, but who had been ruined by speculation, and who was living the life of a recluse with his beautiful child in the wilds of the Sierra Nevada Mountains."

"A year of happiness passed, when the old Spaniard died."

"It was his wish to be buried beneath the foundations of his wild mountain home."

"His wishes should be carried out."

"A deep grave was dug in the flinty soil beneath the cellar—but the old noble was not buried there."

"In digging the man had come upon a mine of gold that contained a fortune equaling that of the famed Montezumas."

"The years flew on, and he worked the mine in secret. A family grew up around him, and at last he found himself a millionaire a hundred times over."

"He was content with this, and was just upon the point of leaving the wild spot, when there occurred that which blasted all his after life."

"In the mean time the knave had become the leader of the most powerful criminal organization in the country."

"They were called the Hounds."

"Rape and murder stalked rampant where they were found."

"Then came the Committee of Vigilance."

"The chief was forced to fly the city with a dozen of his most desperate adherents, among whom was his illegitimate son."

"They sought the mountains, came upon the gold hermit, massacred his whole family to force him to reveal the secret of his hidden mine, and left him for dead."

"Here is the scene of the massacre, painted by the only survivor," and the Spaniard unveiled an easel that had been placed at his side, disclosing to the horrified audience the "horror in paint," which we have before seen.

"Think not for a moment that the man chose to see his family massacred in the stead of giving up his stupendous horde to the bandits."

"At the first onslaught the son of the knave stabbed the youth to the heart as you see in the painting, and with the next breath the three young children shared his fate."

"The man could not speak; his tongue refused to act; he was powerless, frozen—he went mad!"

"I said all was massacred; a beautiful girl of ten had gone into the mountains for game, as was her wont, for she was brought up to the use of firearms, and having followed her game till late, did not return until the tragedy had assumed the aspect seen in the painting."

"As she came upon the scene she was struck senseless at the awful sight, and did not regain consciousness until the band had left the vicinity with but a trifle of the horde they had expected to find."

"Her father was now her only living relative, but

every member of his body was paralyzed except his eyes."

"Ladies and gentlemen, my story is near its close."

"There is the knave—the man whom you have known as Bonanza Bob Banderson! There is his murderous elder son; he is the Lieutenant Redbird of the Overland trails."

"And here," as a wheel-chair containing the form of a man was moved forward, "is the man, Henry Singleton Raye, who was made a 'living corpse' by his cousin, the knave, upon the night of the massacre in Sierra Nevada."

"One thing more; the daughter Aureola Raye, made oath to bring the murderers of her family to the gallows, and she has all but succeeded, with the help of the twin detectives, Richard and Asa Hixon, better known as Dead-Shot Dick, and Ace High, the Gambler Detective."

"The lady herself is known to you under the two characters of, the Bonanza Widow, and Flash, the Girl Sport."

"And now, thanking you for your kind attention, I bid you good-evening!"

The grandee was about to step back, when a form glided to his side, a soft, white hand was laid upon his arm, and two beautiful dark eyes gazed into his own. It was Aureola Raye—the Bonanza Widow—Flash, the Girl Sport.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she said, "the señor has not finished his story! Besides telling you that the woman who has just been wedded to the banker-crook, is Christie Adante, the mother of Lieutenant Redbird, he should have told you that he, Carlos of Torrento, is none other than Ace High, the Gambler Detective, the truest, bravest, noblest man in the world, and the only man I ever did or can love!" and the two disappeared amid an encore that shook the walls.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### ENDS THE ROMANCE.

A FEW words here should suffice.

The bandits upon the stage that night were no delusion, but were the remnant of the Red Birds of the Rockies, so cleverly captured by Richard Hixon, the detective, though the whole affair was planned by Ace High.

After his return to Frisco with the bandits and their guard, Dead-shot Dick had used the papers wrung from Heinrich Fräkelheim in the manner related, to gain admittance to the secret council of the Hounds.

We may as well confess that it was a preconcerted arrangement between the detective brothers that they should enter the council chamber upon this night, so the mystery of Ace High's escape from the Hounds is a mystery no longer.

This same visit led to the total annihilation of the Hounds, and the running of old "Hop, the demon," out of the city.

The papers which Barry Banderson found upon "Le Duc's" desk were, of course, forgeries; but the ends certainly justified the means, when we reflect that the wrongs of an innocent girl were righted.

Young Banderson went down step by step, until he was forced to flee to the mountains, where his father and Redbird had escaped after breaking jail on the night preceding their execution.

The banker-crook's rival in the gigantic speculation, which space has limited to a mere mention in these pages, was, of course, Ace High, with all of the "Bonanza Widow's" great wealth to back him.

After Banderson's consignment to prison, the great detective carried on the game in stocks to a successful issue, and made the million Bonanza Bob had calculated upon.

A word for Paddy McCracken, the Irish Hoodlum: The great services he had rendered to his detective employer as a spy were not forgotten, and he was raised forever above want; besides being taken in training by Dead-shot Dick, who never left his profession of man-hunter, but "died with his boots on," some ten years ago in a "dive" in Denver, and was found with his steel-like hand clutching the throat of his quarry—both dead!

Ace High is to-day one of the solid business men of Frisco, his gambling instincts having been satiated by the long, monotonous "business" play at the Golconda while in the employ of the beautiful woman who is now his wife—Flash, the Girl Sport of Frisco.

THE END.

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